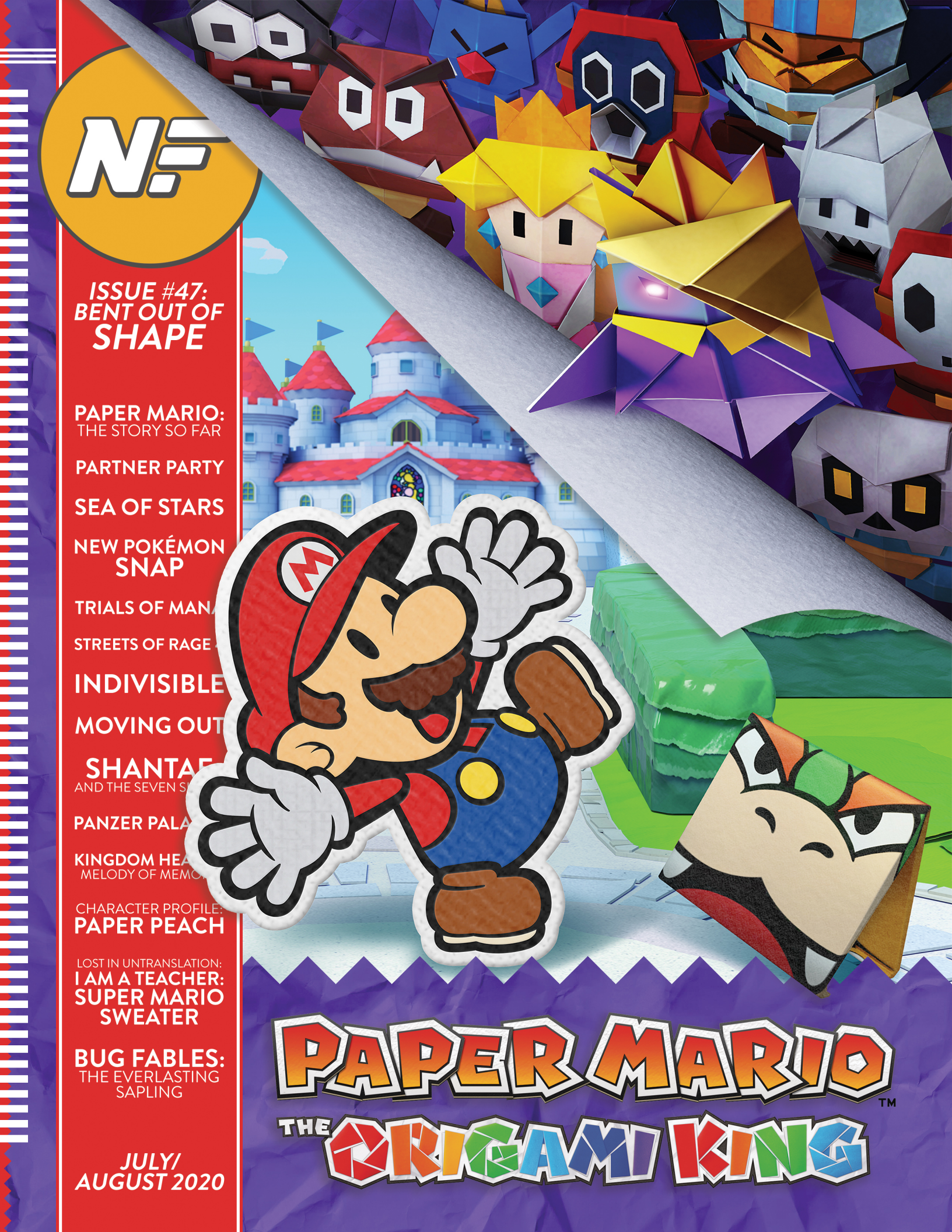
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ISSUE #47:
BENT OUT OF
SHAPE
PAPER MARIO:
THE STORY SO FAR
PARTNER PARTY
SEA OF STARS
NEW POKÉMON
SNAP
TRIALS OF MAN
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CHARACTER PROFILE:
PAPER PEACH
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I AM A TEACHER:
SUPER MARIO
SWEATER
BUG FABLES:
THE EVERLASTING
SAPLING
JULY/
AUGUST 2020
PAPER MARIO™
THE ORIGAMI KING

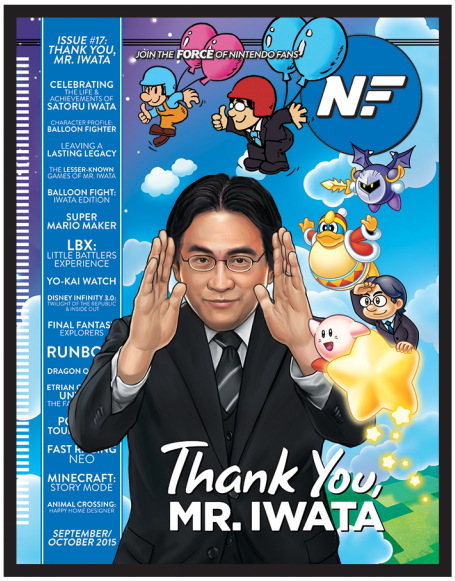
AVAILABLE IN PRINT AGAIN

RIGHT AROUND THIS time of year, eight years ago, Nintendo Power made the announcement that they'd be pulling the plug in December 2012 — and we got busy planning for the launch of Nintendo Force in January 2013! Since that time, we've published a new issue every two months without missing a beat. The one you're reading now is the 47th! That's a lot!

While several of the 46 previous NF issues still have some of their original print run stock ready to be ordered as back issues via the NFMagazine.com website shop, many of them have sold out over the years. I often get asked if those older issues will be made available in print ever again, and I'm happy to announce that yes, they will be! As we head toward our milestone 50th issue, I want to make sure anyone who wants to own a complete in-print NF collection has the option to do so, even if they're just joining the Force now.

We're going to take it slow, though, and reintroduce previously sold-out issues a few at a time over the months ahead. The reason? To make these issues available in print again, we need to turn to print-on-demand publishing, and that's unfortunately a pricier prospect. I don't want any aspiring completionists to be too sticker-shocked! So, for starters, we're bringing back the three you see pictured below: our Shantae-led Issue #11 in honor of the release of the new Shantae and the Seven Sirens on Switch, our first Paper Mario-led edition to pair up nicely with this Origami King issue, and finally our most popular single issue ever: Thank You, Mr. Iwata. Thank you all for your continued support, and for your patience! We'll get all of your shelves fully stocked with the whole NF line soon! — **LUCAS**

NFMagazine.com/Shop



ISSUE #11: LEADING LADIES

ISSUE #17: THANK YOU, MR. IWATA

ISSUE #23: A FRESH COAT OF PAINT

Stay tuned to this same space for further reprint announcements in upcoming issues!

ISSUE #47:
BENT OUT OF
SHAPE

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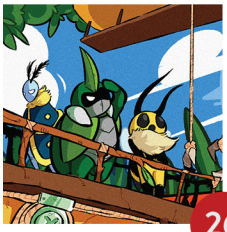
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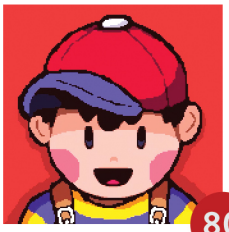
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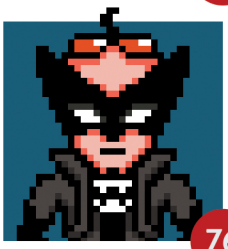
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ON THE COVER

Paper Mario returns to the spotlight of our fine publication for a second time . . . but it looks like King Olly and his Folded Soldiers are trying to claim the coveted cover spot for themselves! OK, so the illusion of the folded-over corner doesn't entirely work once you actually turn the page to arrive here at the table of contents, but it's still neat to have that key art printed on actual page-turnable paper instead of just a static Switch box art, right? We'll just assume that all of you are appreciating that as much as we are.

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INBOX

CRUMPLE, CRUMPLE

Get it? It's like "Grumble, grumble." The old Legend of Zelda line from the hungry Goriya. He complained until he got what he wanted, just as Paper Mario fans have been grumbling for years, waiting for Nintendo to give them a new sequel that's more like the original game in the series and its beloved follow-up, The Thousand-Year Door. But rather than satisfy that hunger, the designers at Intelligent Systems seem to have been satisfying their own creative needs for 16 years now, sending out sequel after sequel with wild new game design ideas. Paper Mario's been in an experimental phase for a long, long time now, and old-school fans are definitely grumbling about it!

You might even say they're bent out of shape!

We're diving into that discussion here in our second issue to place Paper Mario in the spotlight. We've got a Debate centered on fans' expectations for this brand in particular. We've compiled a full retrospective of all the past Paper Mario games leading up to this point, doing that special NF thing of offering complete historical context for the current moment. We're supporting that with a secondary feature that reminds everyone of all of the past partner characters who Paper Mario has teamed up with in all those older games, too, since the presence or absence of great, unique ally characters has become a critical component of conversation regarding this series. Then we've got a four-page preview of the newly revealed Paper Mario: The Origami King to bring it all together. Is it shaping up to be another experimental gameplay design, or could it be the return to form fans have been hoping for? We'll take a look together!

Also, to acknowledge that The Thousand-Year Door is unlikely to be dethroned as long-time fans' favorite game in the series even if Origami King turns out to be truly excellent, we've dedicated the reverse side of our packed-in wall poster to that Cube classic. Now print subscribers can choose to rep either new-school or old-school Paper Mario on their walls.

And that's not all! We couldn't pass up the opportunity to tie something fun into the new game's origami theme, so also bundled with this issue is an exclusive new papercraft toy of Origami Peach!

Taken all together, this is the most Paper Mario-packed edition we could possibly hope to provide. I hope it meets your expectations!

Lucas M. Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #46:
MAY/JUNE 2020

What a joy to finally be able to print that iconic Xenoblade Chronicles art on the front cover of an NF issue! And what a further joy to finally be able to play the Definitive Edition of that Wii masterpiece, now on the Switch. Our review kicks off later in this issue, but you'll have to wait a little longer for it to be fully completed. (We're taking our time.) Speaking of waiting, we're having to wait a little longer for the *Super* Mario news we thought would be dropping in advance of this issue, so subbing in for the printed questions from NF #46 are a set of Patreon post Player's Poll inquiries about *Paper* Mario instead! We asked you to share your personal Paper Mario history and name your favorite game. We wanted to know your thoughts on tag-along partner characters. And lastly, we asked you to give us your opinion on the overall direction of the series!

LETTERS

Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door was my first experience with this series, as well as my first game for the GameCube. It was a great experience given that it was also the first time I played any type of Mario RPG game. I would consider it my favorite since it has a special place in my heart, as well as having an amazing set of characters, worlds and an awesome soundtrack! **– JAVIER MURGUIA**

If you consider Super Mario RPG part of the history, then I started there. It was astonishing. When Paper Mario came out on the N64, I was immediately there. I don't think I ever finished it, and somehow I missed TTYD, but when Super Paper Mario came out, and we could swap the 2D world into 3D and back . . . I was hooked back in again. I think that's my favorite one so far. I recently downloaded Paper Mario and Super Mario RPG on the Wii U Virtual Console and am going back through those. They're still just as awesome now. **– BEEJ AND VOID**

I have played every Paper Mario game since the original! I have followed the series throughout all of its changes and new twists. My favorite is Paper Mario on the N64, and that game is also my favorite game of all time. I got it when I was little, so my Mom used to play with me to help me figure it out. It will forever be my favorite game of all time. **– GEORGE LUPE**

The first Paper Mario game I ever played was Sticker Star. That was before I learned people's feelings about the game, especially with how the battle system worked. While I liked it for a while, I didn't realize what the series was missing until I finally got to play TTYD. It showed me what Paper Mario could be and made me understand what Sticker Star was lacking. I don't hate SS as much as others do, it's just that I found it more disappointing, especially after realizing what it could have been. **– MAPS**

I don't think partners are explicitly needed, however they do help make the games feel unique. I've always been hoping for a Wiggler, Chain Chomp, Shy Guy or Dry Bones partner. It's odd that they've not yet happened, despite being pretty common enemies in the Mario series. A Ninji could be fun too. I feel there's still a lot of untapped potential with partners, and that's what hurts the most about their exclusion in recent entries. So while not outright needed or necessary, they are always a welcomed addition and make the journey more fun and less lonely. **– ELISKOR**

I don't necessarily feel a Paper Mario game *needs* partners to really shine, but I feel Thousand-Year Door and, to a lesser extent, Super Paper Mario show that a Paper Mario game without partners does leave a void in need of filling, as they can be a great source of constant humor and character to add a lot of personality to the game. If I had to pick one partner I loved the most, it would probably be Lady Bow, as I feel that she's got a whole lot of charm and

SEEK OUT THE SWORDS!

READY TO EMBARK on an extra quest? We had such a positive response to our big Boo hunt back in Issue #42 that we're challenging all of you with another test of your visual acuity! How many swords can you find in this sword-themed NF issue?

There are two categories of competition this time. First up, try to count all of the swords that appear visually throughout this entire magazine. They could be depicted in artwork (like the three swords held by the Tri Force Heroes below), or they could be in screenshots of various games. Some may be printed pretty small! That's the challenging part!

Second, try to find all the appearances of the word "sword" in the text! That's the next level of difficulty, because it means you'll have to read this edition from cover to cover! Plurals count, so add any appearance of "swords" to your tally, along with any times either word might appear in capitalized form as well. Swords, swords, swords!

We'll report back with the answers to both challenges in our next issue! (. . . Wait, that means I have to be really sure of the solutions to both myself. Eek!) Enjoy the quest! **— LUCAS**

SWORD-SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Are you suffering from eye strain? Has our latest task taxed your powers of perception to the breaking point, or beyond? If so, we apologize most sincerely!

At the end of our last issue, we issued a challenge for you to flip back through the entire volume and try to track down each and every sword available to be seen — both those depicted visually, like the three held by the Links to the left, as well as all of the uses of the word "sword" itself. It was a massive undertaking!

We promised to report back with the number of each, so here they are: 241 swords were printed in pictures (including lots of tiny tricky ones), and 193 instances of the word "sword" or "swords" appeared in the text. Fret not if you missed a few! It was a truly tough task! (We'll make the next one a little easier.)

character to her (I mean they brought her back as a cameo in TTYD), though Admiral Bobbery has to be second for his backstory. **— MATTHEW THE DARK**

I feel like a Paper Mario game can be good without partners! If there are likable and unique characters in the games that are a part of a big story, I would be content. My favorite partner from past games is Vivian! I love her story with her going toward your side because she isn't wicked at heart. She is also one of the best LGBT characters in gaming! She was portrayed as a trans woman in the Japanese and European versions and I wish the English translation had kept that! **— EMMA BELK**

I love Kooper, he's the best. **— TORIN QUINLIVAN**

After six Mario & Luigi games, two traditional Paper Marios and the one SNES classic that built the foundation of what a Mario RPG is, I welcome with arms wide open any and all new ideas their developers can come up with. **— LUKE DRAKE**

Experimentation makes each game feel fresh, for better or worse. I believe that Nintendo should harken to the original gameplay style in their next installment, so that longtime fans may be sated and that newcomers may understand why it has such a cult following. The heavyhanded approach to using the series' gimmick of paper is beginning to grow tiresome, as games prior only minutely used the theme, just enough to show that it was there and played a small part, whereas now it seems to rest on it as a significant part of the series. **— LINXORD**

I'm OK with Nintendo trying new things with Paper Mario, but I feel the execution of their ideas has been off the mark. Super Paper Mario was too easy for my liking for most of the game, while Sticker Star and Color Splash largely trivialized combat. But I did really like the story and the variety of helpers in SPM, and I do see potential in the latter two's attempts to shake up the battle system. It might be better to return to the series' roots if Origami King doesn't work out, but I think it'd be cool to see a new Paper Mario game successfully pull off something different. **— ANDREW PEERMAN**

I think that the only good "experimental" Paper Mario game was the first one, Super Paper Mario; I'm hoping that Origami King is good, but I firmly believe that the series needs to move back toward Thousand-Year Door and away from Sticker Star. **— ZAKANUVA**

I love the experimentation. Keep it weird Nintendo. If you do the same thing over and over it gets boring. I only wish they would bring great games like the Thousand-Year Door to Switch so that everyone can enjoy it. **— ADAM YEAGER**

I've played them all since I rented Paper Mario for the N64 from Blockbuster! The original is still my favorite. Something about the paper look in the N64 engine is lovely, and the nostalgia certainly helps.

A team of partners isn't necessary, but it certainly brings a lot of charm and story elements you don't get in other Mario games. Vivian is my favorite partner!

I love the experimentation! I really enjoyed Color Splash — it was something different and was enjoyable even if the combat system wasn't always the greatest. Experimentation is good, but I feel like we're due for a new traditional Paper Mario! **— MELANIE McMAHON**

I didn't really enjoy the non-RPG style ones — I think I got the first non-RPG one for the Wii and never even finished it. I love platforming, but it seemed pretty shallow compared to how creative Nintendo usually is with that style of game. **— RIO SENECA FERNANDES**

DON'T ANGER THE OX

Hey Ox,

Do you agree with Nintendo's style of drip-feeding free DLC (Splatoon 2, Kirby Star Allies, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate to an extent, etc.)? **— JOSHUA CHAMOT**

If that makes the difference between getting the content or not getting it at all, then I'm all for it. It would be nice if they'd do updated releases with all the content on cartridges later for preservation's sake, though.

Do you ever expect to see a Game & Watch Collection like we saw on the DS on a future Nintendo system? **— @TURNERSCREEN**

I'd be more surprised if we didn't.

What I want to know is if Nintendo's fine with Virtual Boy now, then when do we get a collection for *that?*

LETTERS, CONTINUED!

I think that every game in a series should push to do something new, not rehash the previous game. I enjoy what Nintendo has tried to accomplish, but I feel for the most part the battle systems have fallen short. Collecting attacks can get very monotonous, and it seems more engaging to have those standard attacks and find ways to enhance them. **— JASON SMITH**

I'm not as big of a fan of the new territory that Paper Mario seems to have entered. I still have enjoyed both Sticker Star and Color Splash, but there was so much potential behind those titles that I think went unused . . . which is why I'm so interested in Bug Fables, which is a spiritual successor to the Paper Mario series! It uses the same base formula as TTYD, but shakes it up just a bit to keep things fresh. If you are a fan of the original Paper Mario entries but haven't found the newer ones as interesting, then I would encourage you to check it out! **— NATHANIEL SMITH**
We agree! We've got a review of Bug Fables ready for our readers over in the Download section of this issue.

For me, the first Paper Mario for Nintendo 64 is still my favorite. Super Mario RPG was (and remains!) one of my all-time favorite games, and that game was the closest we ever got to a true sequel. I remember asking my parents to rent it (from the video rental store — look it up, kids!) over and over so I could finally beat it. Then, one day, I rented a copy that someone had saved just a little before where I had been. I continued from their save, and played enough to finally beat Bowser in the most satisfying final boss battle of my young life. I admit that Thousand-Year Door is a better game, but the original is still my favorite! **— JEFF SHORT**

The first Paper Mario experience I had was with The Thousand-Year Door — which I most definitely consider to be a masterpiece — but I would say Super Paper Mario just about has the edge over the GameCube entry. While it certainly isn't without its faults, the ambitious storyline, incredible writing and original cast of antagonists simply made it unforgettable for me.

I think the Paper Mario series definitely benefits from having partners, even if it is only a single "fixed" character — with the likes of Tippi and Huey taking on that role. Personally, though, I am more a fan of also having partners with unique abilities and personalities who help out in battle. Here's hoping that The Origami King takes such an approach! As for who my favorite partner is, I'd have to say Vivian. **— WOLF DE WITTE**

Yes, they need tag-along partners. My favorite is Koops! **— WILLIAM KIRCHNER**

I personally like the idea of them trying to experiment and keep innovating, as one such experiment (Super Paper Mario) was my favorite of the series. Although I do wish they'd keep in the experience points and growing more powerful, like the original two games. **— PUT 9-VOLT IN SMASH BROS PLEASE**

I'm not prideful enough to say what a Paper Mario game *needs* to be great. I love the ragtag crew of partners, but the guys and gals at Nintendo are pros. They are capable of subverting expectations in a good way and giving us something incredible that we never knew we wanted. They just had a couple of flops. This is a new Nintendo, though, so I'm ready to roll those dice again.

My favorite? Goombario for life. I got attached to the little guy, and his attack was super quick to execute. That's important to me. He was an efficient little fungus. **— DONNIE KUSIC**

I have only ever really played Sticker Star (got it on sale at GameStop). I was slightly disappointed with the game because I found I was hesitating to use the stickers for fear of running out. I enjoyed all the Toads and funny humor, but never finished the game. I do wish they would go a different direction than that game though. I think a Paper Mario Nintendo Franchise RPG (like Smash, with all the characters) would definitely get me back into them. **— MICHAEL OPFERMAN**

I honestly have no dog in the horse race of the Paper Mario series. I don't even like Mario as a character. Now Paper WARIO. There's a video game! **— IZZEKIAL**

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Torin Quinlivan**, the winner of our Patreon post Player's Poll! We'll still declare a winner for the Poll printed in NF #46 when we print those answers (probably next time), but here's a bonus trio of queries to boot!

QUESTION #1

It took over 20 years, but Pokémon Snap is finally getting a sequel! What's one long, *long* dormant series you'd like to see get a new sequel next?

QUESTION #2

How interested are you in playing old games? Do you seek out titles from the past, or do you stick to new releases only?

QUESTION #3

Back to Pokémon Snap: Did you ever play the original? Are you interested in playing the new installment? What Pokémon do you hope will be included in it?

Email your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #48" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win a brand-new copy of New Pokémon Snap for the Nintendo Switch!

NINTENDO FORCE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Lucas M. Thomas
@NintendoForce

STAFF WRITERS
Evan Campbell
@evancampbell
Chris Carter
@DtoidChris
Kevin Cassidy
@GoNintendoTweet
Jonathan Holmes
@NonTrotski
Kevin Knezevic
@kevknez
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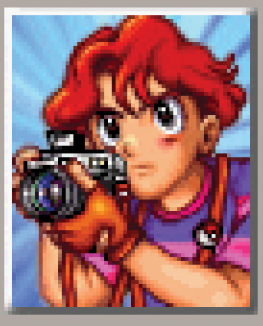
STAFF ARTISTS
Mark Kelly
@Fryguy64
Lindsey Layne King
@Jazaaboo
Matthew Loffhagen
@kotorcomics
Matthew Taranto
@MatthewPTaranto
Thor Thorvaldson
@thormeister1971

GET IN TOUCH!

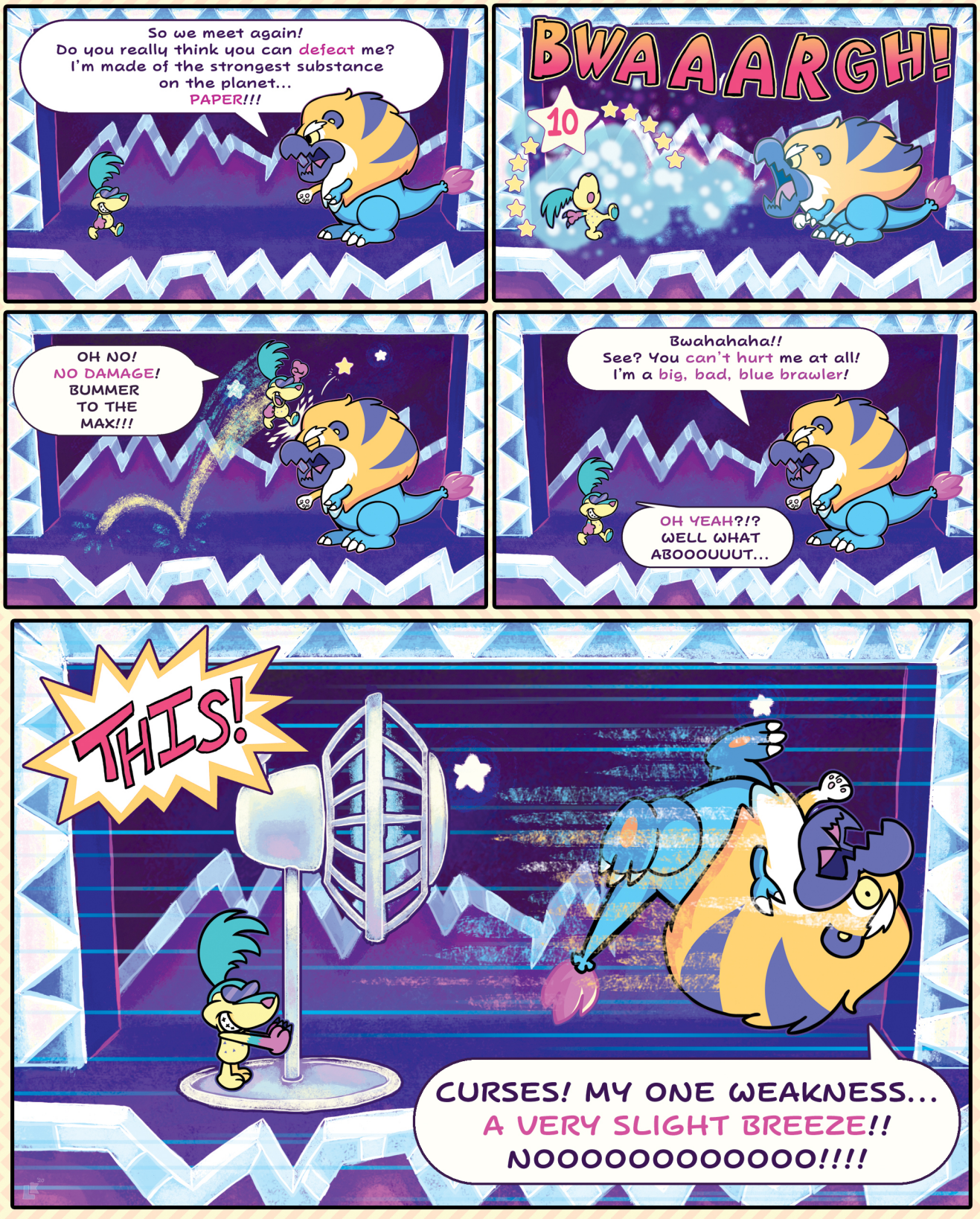
Have a question? The best way to ask it is through Patreon's Direct Messaging system, which you have access to if you're one of our Patreon patrons! (Thanks in advance for your patience with receiving a reply!)



REST 0

the sitcom starring a final boss and an obnoxious '90s video game mascot

by LLK



BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

The Year With No E3

It was meant to happen in June. It didn't. What might that mean for the future?

I MISS GOING to E3 — but now everyone is in that same boat, as E3 2020 was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. This invariably raised several questions: Could the hype be the same? Would companies all do online presentations like Nintendo? Will E3 survive this?

This year was already in question, because Sony had again elected to have no presence even before all the COVID-19 stuff hit. Everyone was thrown, because this was speculated to be the year they'd release all the info about the PS5, and now we obviously know that was the case. Having playable units on the show floor would have been huge, but perhaps they weren't ready yet? This is a big test, though. Can online hype replace physical hype? With so many forced into that arena, we will have to find out as the year goes on. Sony ended up pulling the curtain back on PS5 with an online event on June 11.

Xbox had already revealed their next-gen machine, the Xbox Series X, so missing out on the E3 spotlight seems to have not disrupted their PR plans. Their next event is scheduled for July. (It seems likely they were waiting to see what Sony would show, and are now adjusting accordingly.)

Finally, Nintendo. There has been no announcement of a Nintendo Direct to take the place of the Digital Event that would have coincided with E3 — but then Nintendo rarely announces such things more than a day or two in advance, if at all. They may not have much to present, as many games have been delayed because dev teams can't go into their offices safely, and the games and consoles themselves have had production issues due to the virus.

There's a discussion every year about whether or not the biggest gaming convention on the planet is truly still relevant or not. What most people don't know is a huge amount of business happens on the restricted upper floors of the L.A. Convention Center based on the media's take on what each company has to present at the show. While developers build their displays on the show floor to woo the press and entice the gamers, they're really generating appeal so their products can sell to stores. The more people talking about a new game, the more copies that will be preordered by big retailers and distributors. The suits rarely hit the floor, and the entire clandestine operation chugs on year after year while we're all distracted by the new games and announcements. Will all of these deals take place on Zoom instead? Can they?

There's also the timing of it all. With each company no longer required to present within the constraints of the convention days, will they lean more heavily on their own private events that are more controlled anyway? Companies will spend a lot less without having to build a booth display to get butts in seats. They will inevitably have different marketing costs, but when the dust settles they'll see whether it's truly worth spending all the cash on a behemoth booth when they can just as easily move their dollars to an online space or small physical filmed events and get a similar result. It remains to be seen, but the majority of gamers experience E3 online anyway.

Seeing how packed it had become after they let the general public buy tickets to the show, even if you went in person, you probably didn't get to see much of the show except what you truly wanted to because of the outrageous lines. With gamers, media and industry all complaining about the event, it seems the writing was already on the wall.

So here we are, in some sort of horrid gaming purgatory with no E3 announcements, fewer new games and a heaping amount of uncertainty and confusion. It remains to be seen what the already-scheduled E3 2021 will become as a result of the industry forcing itself to survive without the show here in 2020, but chances are it will always be a shadow of its former self moving forward. **— BRETT**

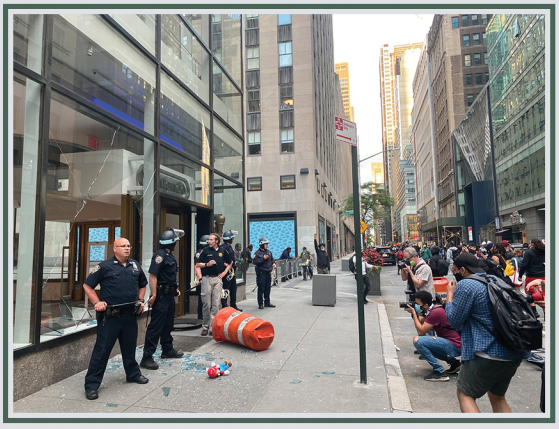


PHOTO CREDIT: SARAH BOXER

NINTENDO NY DAMAGED

But don't worry, it's just one smashed window.

PROTESTS HAVE BROKEN out across the United States — and around the world — following the death of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis. He was killed by now-former police officer Derek Chauvin, who has been arrested and charged with murder. That arrest and murder charge was slow to arrive after an excruciatingly graphic video of George Floyd's final minutes of life, with his neck pinned down under Derek Chauvin's knee, went viral on a global scale. So protests of that injustice and police brutality as a whole have erupted, and have been especially massive in major cities like New York.

While these protests have been peaceful for the most part, some have resulted in property damage to businesses, including Nintendo's flagship store, Nintendo NY. Broken windows can be replaced and entire buildings can be rebuilt if need be — this means little in the long run and should not detract from the message of the Black Lives Matter movement. When I saw the photo up above shared by journalist Sarah Boxer on Twitter, though, I felt we should preserve it in print. It's the little Mario plush toy lying on the ground that gets to me — the world is hurting so much here in 2020 from the ongoing pandemic and now this new surge of overt racism and police violence that even an icon of fun, happiness and family togetherness seems to have fallen.

We'll pick up the pieces — if we all work together to recognize and correct the injustices of the past, and the present. **— LUCAS**

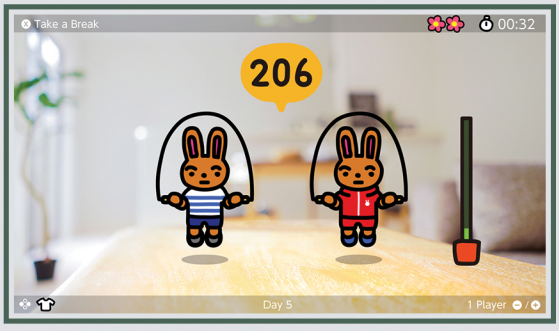
PHOTO CREDIT: @VGARTANDTIDBITS

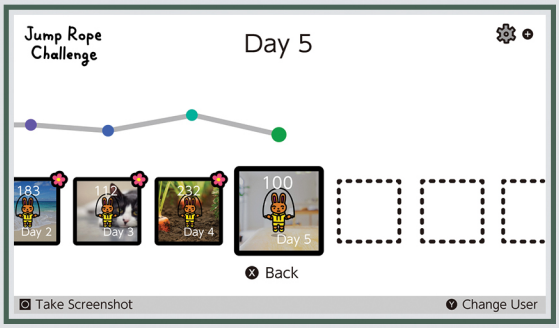
FITNESS FOR FREE

Introducing Nintendo's Jump Rope Challenge.

RING FIT ADVENTURE continues to be almost entirely sold out as the COVID-19 pandemic drags on — a handful of restocks have popped up recently, but they're quickly snatched up — but Nintendo has kindly counterbalanced that lack of fitness gaming on the Switch just a little bit by presenting a new, entirely free fitness game on the Switch. Say hello to Jump Rope Challenge, a free eShop download that encourages you to move your body like a bunny.

Jump Rope Challenge was created by a few of Nintendo's designers who've been working from home since coronavirus quarantines began. They wanted to have a little something to encourage daily exercise and promote ongoing health, so they whipped up this quick game that has you holding two Joy-Cons in your hands and mimicking the action of jumping rope. It's very simple. But it's free! And it keeps track of your jump count day after day, so it might just motivate you to hop to it for a few minutes a day, each day, until this pandemic passes. **— LUCAS**





Kirby Can Make Badges

Can badges! Made out of cans! Can you? You can!

SOON KIRBY WILL have his face on all things merchandisable. I had to do a triple take at this device before understanding that its purpose is to make little buttons — or "can badges" — with supplied Kirby art. An app named Can Badge Good (only available in Japan) also adds to the fun, allowing more designs to be printed. Typically button badges are pretty cheap, and the device itself isn't that costly, coming in at around $32. I thought this was the weirdest Kirby item to date . . . until I spied the Kirby fondue maker they just released! What will Kirby become next? A lawn sprinkler?

Pac-Man is 40!

And he's celebrating with tons of new merch!

THE BIG YELLOW pizza with a slice removed is celebrating his 40th this year, and a flood of new merchandise is here to mark the milestone. That's right, Pac-Man is now over the hill — but his brand is still going strong!

Arguably the most notable and flashiest piece announced so far is the one offered by Arcade1Up — the company that makes those slightly-smaller-than-full-size arcade machines. It's a special anniversary cabinet meticulously miniaturized with all of the right wooden details and Pac'd full with a slew of Pac-Man games, including Pac-Man, Pac-Man Plus, Super Pac-Man, Pac & Pal, Pac-Land and Pac-Mania. They even threw in Galaga for good measure! This special edition will set you back $399.99, and while pre-orders went live in March, they're still being accepted as of this writing.

Arcade1Up is not the only company in the mini arcade cabinet game, as Numskull will have a few different quarter-scale machines becoming available soon as well. There is a 40th edition one that will set you back around $150, a straight replica of the yellow cabinet for $120, and you can even get an autographed version signed by Pac-Man creator Toru Iwatani himself! (That one is UK-only and will be £299.99.) Numskull is also offering a gamut of other gift items, including socks, coasters, mugs, a couple of really nice pin sets, floor mats and more.

Namco Bandai is also exercising its merchandising arm (as if there was any doubt). While you can already find Pac-Man on a host of typical products, an anniversary such as this that not many characters can claim demands more unique items. The corporate giant has first announced a wireless phone speaker/charger in the shape of the Pac. It looks really slick, and it even lights up! Some articles have been teasing fans with mentions of a shiny gold plush. (Shouldn't they wait another 10 years for the gold stuff?) Namco also plans to release bobbleheads, keychains and a his and hers watch set. No images of these items have been made available as of this issue's time of printing, but I'm already drooling. That's a hefty Pac of merchandise!

Collector's Corner is compiled by Brett Martin, the world record holder for the largest collection of video game memorabilia on Earth. For more cool collectibles and information on how to order from import shops, visit his site, The Video Game Memorabilia Museum, at videogamemm.com.

Mana Made Mini

Assemble a trio of Trials heroes . . . on your shelf!

UPON OPENING UP the Trials of Mana game case, an ad fell out showing several pieces of merchandise that would soon be available to purchase from the Square Enix Shop. One of them was a six-character set of figures with a diorama backdrop! Duran, Reisz, Kevin, Charlotte, Angela and Hawkeye are all sculpted with great detail and color. The issue is the release date, as . . . there isn't one. The site still says "waiting list," so apparently they're delayed.

LEGO Super Mario Powers Up

Iconic alternate outfits are joining Plastic Mario's lineup of products.

WE ALL SUSPECTED that at some point the LEGO Mario we saw in the first building set would dress up and gain some powers. Well, he will! Fire Mario throws fireballs at enemies, getting more coins from them if burned. (Pretend fireballs, of course.) Propeller Mario can fly up and grab invisible coins in the stratosphere. Cat Mario can climb walls, nabbing coins off of more vertical surfaces, and Builder Mario can crash down on LEGO bricks and extract coins from them. All of these suits require the base model Mario from the starter pack that arrives on August 1. Each will add their own displays to the little screen on Mario's chest, like the Super Hammer or Fire Flower. Because the focus for each seems to be on coin collecting, I wonder if there will be a feature that unlocks when a special amount of coins are collected? Since we checked in last, there have also been sneak peeks at Bowser's Castle: a boss battle set with all sorts of features. And Bowser looks more LEGO-y than Mario! There's a stone Bowser as well (for intimidation), and there looks to be a classic drawbridge showdown to end your adventure!

Lounging with Lapras

Use Surf! (In a lake or swimming pool.)

THIS PIECE IS ingenious for all those Trainers out there who've ever wished to ride a Lapras, and it's available at the perfect time for swimming weather (provided the pandemic doesn't ruin your summer). $50 buys you this 80" long and 72" tall water monster, and it can be bought directly from the site shop at PokemonCenter.com. It can hold nearly 450 pounds too!

Sonic Scores a Sequel

Sonic the Movie 2 will debut . . . sometime.

WHILE THE WORLDWIDE coronavirus outbreak has unquestionably disrupted the flow of the video game industry, even heavier hit has been Hollywood — new productions can't safely film scenes while observing proper safety procedures, and even movies that were already finished can't debut in theaters since all the theaters have been closed down for months. (As this issue is wrapping up, some theater chains are revealing their plans to reopen to audiences soon . . . but please don't go there when they do. They won't be safe to visit again for a long time.)

Hopefully safety will be restored in time to take in a viewing of the new Sonic the Hedgehog: The Movie 2! The well-received live-action Sonic film opened early enough this year that it was able to bring in a super-sized sum from ticket sales before shutdowns started closing businesses' doors in mid-March, and the powers that be were impressed enough to greenlight a follow-up. Hooray!

As for how they'll safely film it? I have no idea. At least Sonic, as a CGI character, can have his animations completed without danger. **— LUCAS**

Drastic Downsizing

Sega introduces the Game Gear Micro.

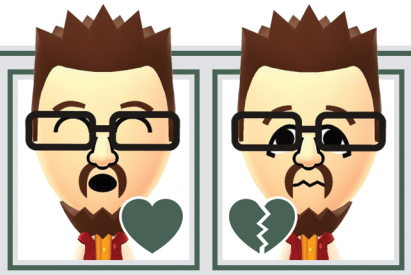
DOES ANYONE REMEMBER the Game Boy Micro? A super-compact version of the Game Boy Advance hardware, it was sent to market in 2005 as one last hurrah for the Game Boy brand name. Well, 15 years later, Sega's answer has arrived: Take a look at the Game *Gear* Micro, an even more shriveled system that may actually be too small to seriously play.

Just look at the (lack of) size of that thing! Hold up your own hand to your face and compare, then go ahead and slap yourself in the nose because that seems to be about how close to your eyes you'll need to hold this tiniest-ever piece of gaming tech in order to make out anything that's happening on its coin-sized screen. What a truly wild and weird product to produce.

Assuming you're interested in giving it a go to judge for yourself, you'll have a few more obstacles to overcome beyond eyestrain: The Game Gear Micro is only announced for Japan at the moment, and you'll also have to buy four of them in order to get the full experience. That's because Sega is manufacturing four different colors of the system and bundling four different games on each one! Imagine if Nintendo had pulled that kind of a trick with the NES or SNES Classic. Ay, caramba! They each launch on October 6 for 4,980 yen apiece. (Around $47.)

The kicker? If you preorder all four in a set, Sega will give you a magnifying glass accessory to help you see the screen. Seriously. **— LUCAS**

Great!
The surprisingly fun Sonic film is getting a follow-up!



Oh.
How long will it be before theaters are safe again?

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

IT'S SUMMERTIME NOW, and for farmers that means it's time for long, hot days toiling away in the heat of the sun. If you'd like to gain a greater appreciation for agriculture, you could begin by checking out Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town, which goes on sale on July 14! It's a remake of one of the best of the old Harvest Moons, and we'll seek to confirm its quality in our review next time.

YOU'LL ONLY HAVE three days to get your hands dirty working the soil in Mineral Town, though, before the next big Switch adventure presents itself: Paper Mario: The Origami King, our cover star for this edition, is due to drop on July 17! We've got tons of coverage prepared in the pages ahead to prepare you for its launch, so flip onward!

WHILE PAPER MARIO fans keep praying that Nintendo will someday truly revisit the GameCube era of that franchise, Square Enix is doing exactly that on August 27 with the launch of Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Remastered Edition. It's a brand-new version of a Cube classic, now made quite a bit more accessible. For details, continue on to Page 45 to check out our full explanation!

BEYOND THE MONTH of August, little is pinned down on the release calendar right now. We do have one firm date locked in for October, though: October 20 will see the release of LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga! Will the team at TT Games be able to pack nine films' worth of content into a single adventure? We talk about it on Page 47!

DISNEY WILL BE bringing Switch players a double dose of classic movie nostalgia before this year is done! While LEGO Star Wars will revisit the films from the galaxy far, far away, a new Kingdom Hearts game will take us back to the worlds of Aladdin, The Little Mermaid, Peter Pan and more as Sora, Goofy and Donald Duck relive two decades' worth of their crossover journeys. Learn more on Page 51!

FINALLY, AND MOST shockingly, we actually have an all-new Pokémon Snap sequel to look forward to! We've been wanting to hear this announcement since people were still [illegible] out about Y2K! We've got a first look ready for you on Page 50, so flip over there and kick off your own personal Snap celebration!

MIN MIN FOR the win win!

OK, who called it correctly? I'll admit that my top prediction was Twintelle, while Min Min I thought would be the second most likely to claim the first DLC fighter spot of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's Fighters Pass Vol. 2. But I'm thrilled to have been not quite right, because Min Min, as I said last time, is my personal favorite ARMS fighter! It's great to see her get the call up to the biggest crossover fighting event in all of video games.

Mr. Sakurai presented Min Min in a special broadcast recorded from his very own home in Japan, as Nintendo's development teams have transitioned to working from home due to the ongoing danger of the coronavirus outbreak. It's too early to say for sure, but it's very likely that the reveal and release schedule for the remaining five DLC fighters will be stretched out a bit further than originally planned. Min Min's debut was probably first scheduled to happen at E3, I'm sure, and we may have even gotten a tease of the following fighter as well before that expo got cancelled. Alas! We'll just have to have a bit of extra patience going forward. They'll all be completed and unveiled eventually!

Min Min's joining Ultimate as standalone DLC on June 29 for $5.99, or you can add her to your roster by buying the full Fighters Pass Vol. 2. We'll have our review of how she measures up in Smash in our next issue!

THE POKÉMON DLC ERA HAS BEGUN

The Pokémon Sword & Shield Expansion Pass has altered two decades' worth of established marketing strategy.

RED & BLUE had Yellow. Gold & Silver had Crystal. Ruby & Sapphire were followed by Emerald, and then Platinum, Black 2, White 2, Ultra Sun and Ultra Moon all continued the trend in the years that followed. With only one exception — X & Y never got a Z — every pair of mainline Pokémon games for the past 20+ years has been followed by a "third version" that took the same setting and remixed it a bit, giving The Pokémon Company another chance to sell a lot of the same content to the same customers again.

But no more! While TPC could have easily decided to create a standard third version of Sword & Shield to offer as a retail release here in 2020, they've instead opted to break free of two decades of tradition and embrace DLC instead. Now that the first part of the new Sword & Shield Expansion Pass has gone live, we can declare it: An all-new era has begun.

KUBFU

The star of The Isle of Armor, this kung fu panda will be given to all DLC players by default. Train it well!

URSHIFU (RAPID STRIKE)

Kubfu can evolve in two different ways. The first is the "Rapid Strike" form, which is Fighting/Water.

URSHIFU (SINGLE STRIKE)

Fans of One-Punch Man may want to select Single Strike style instead, though. It's Fighting/Dark!

GALARIAN ARTICUNO

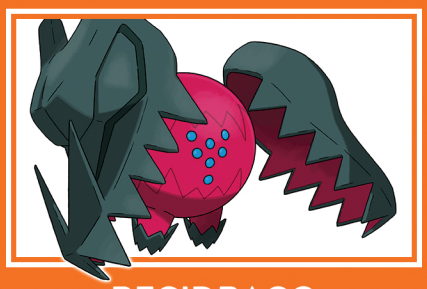
The Legendary Birds are back! And looking different. Articuno has now become a Psychic/Flying-type.

GALARIAN ZAPDOS

Zapdos has lost its interest in electricity and become a flightless Fighter! (It's still part Flying-type, though.)

GALARIAN MOLTRES

Moltres seems to have had the toughest transition. Its Fire typing has smoldered, leaving it as Dark/Flying.



REGIDRAGO

New Regis are here, for the first time since Gen IV! Regidrago is the new paragon of Dragon-types.

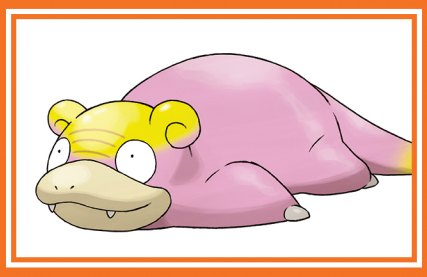
MORE NEW 'MONS!

The PokéDex expands with the Expansion Pass.

An incredibly vocal group of hardcore Pokémon fans raged against The Pokémon Company and Game Freak for not including all 800+ older monsters in the base game of Sword & Shield. While the Expansion Pass isn't restoring *all* the past-gen creatures that didn't make the cut, it is bringing many more into Galar for the first time. And over and above that, the DLC is also introducing all-new, never-before-seen Pokémon and brand-new Galarian forms for several old favorites, too! Here are just a few you'll find!

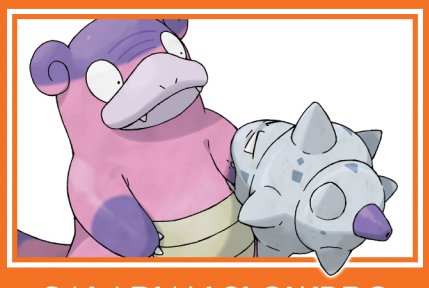
REGIELEKI

No, it's not Regilectric! This new Electric-type titan is instead officially named Regieleki. It's pure lightning!



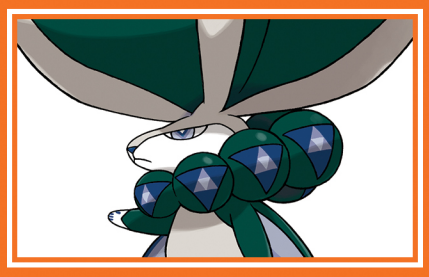
GALARIAN SLOWPOKE

The Water typing has washed away from Galar's Slowpoke population, leaving them as pure Psychic.



GALARIAN SLOWBRO

When a Galarian Slowpoke evolves on the Isle of Armor, though, it picks up the Poison typing too!



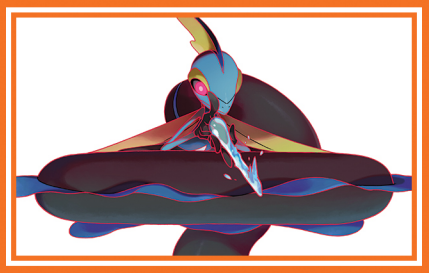
CALYREX

Finally, this big-brained bunny seems to be some kind of Pokémonarch, reigning over the Crown Tundra!

What's more, this new era may well prove to be better than what came before, in terms of the amount of new content being offered. Several of the old third versions charged full retail price, but presented no new Pokémon to encounter and catch — if anything, they brought in a handful of returning faces from previous gens. Well, the Sword & Shield Expansion Pass does that too, but then takes the next step and keeps inching the overall Pokédex total ever closer to 1,000 unique monsters. Check out a few of the fresh faces just above!

Old third versions frequently added no new explorable territory, either, opting for remixes of the existing routes like Platinum's "every area has winter weather now" idea. But, again, the Expansion Pass is breaking free from those old constraints and offers two totally new locations to explore, on par with the Wild Area from the base game: the Isle of Armor and the Crown Tundra, both of which lend their names to Part 1 and Part 2 of the Pass DLC, respectively.

It's fascinating to me! As a student of Nintendo history, I'm still honestly kind of shocked to see The Pokémon Company seemingly leave millions of dollars' worth of retail revenue on the table in favor of taking this downloadable gamble. They absolutely could have held all this content back and released "Pokémon Super Shield & Super Sword" this November, and then just let the cash roll in like always. I can't wait to see the DLC sales data!



INTELEON

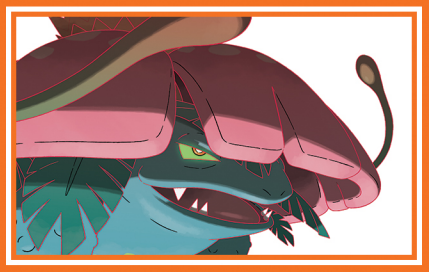
In its new Gigantamax form, Inteleon becomes a sharpshooting sniper lying atop its own massive tail!

CINDERACE

Cinderace doesn't actually grow much in Gigantamax form, but it does gain the power to kick huge fireballs!

RILLABOOM

Say goodbye to that tiny old wooden drum — Gigantamax Rillaboom wields a forest-sized drum set!



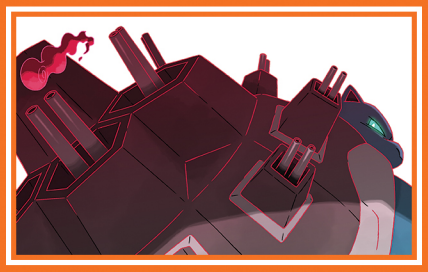
VENUSAUR

Not wanting to let Charizard have all the fun, the other two Gen I starters now have G-Max forms too!

HERE WE GROW AGAIN

The Gigantamax selection expands as well.

If you've been having fun polishing up your Rita Repulsa impression ("Make my monster grow!"), then you'll be pleased to learn that the Sword & Shield Expansion Pass is increasing the size of the Gigantamax roster! In addition, a critical new quality-of-life tweak has been introduced: a new item called Max Soup can unlock the Gigantamax potential in any member of a compatible species. So my trusty Orbeetle, who could only Dynamax before, will now be able to access its Gigantamax form! Sweet!



BLASTOISE

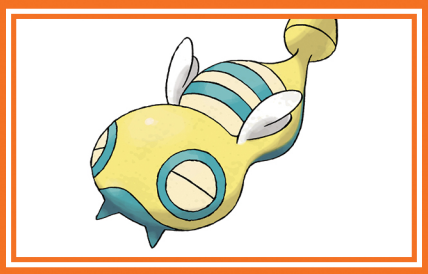
Blastoise's water cannon-equipped shell has mutated into a massive battleship of Hydro Pumping power!

URSHIFU (RAPID STRIKE)

Not only does Urshifu have two unique standard forms, but it also has two different Gigantamax forms!

URSHIFU (SINGLE STRIKE)

Will you choose the path of darkness, or train in the Tower of Waters instead? The decision is up to you!



DUNSPARCE

Finally, here's Dunsparce! Does it have a new Gigantamax form? No! It doesn't. Because it stinks.

Assuming this method of selling an Expansion Pass for $29.99 to existing Sword & Shield owners ends up being comparable to whatever sales total they might have projected from going with the old way of doing things, this should just be the first of many such DLC expansions we'll see for Pikachu's ever-growing brand. Gen IX, Gen X, Gen XI . . . Expansion Pass DLC could easily become the new, predictable "third version" going forward.

And you know what? I'm here for it! I get the greatest enjoyment out of Pokémon games when they contain new creatures I've never captured before, and with the old way of doing things we had to wait three or four years between generations to get to that point again. Now, I just had a blast filling up my Galar Dex last Fall, I'm setting out on my journey across the Isle of Armor now, and then I've still got the Crown Tundra to explore this November. Three different occasions of new 'mons to catch in just one calendar year? By golly, I'll take it!

Pokémon Sword & Shield Expansion Pass, Part 1: The Isle of Armor has just gone live a few days before our print date for this issue, so our review isn't ready quite yet. By the time you have this edition in your hands, I'll be well on my way toward building an unbreakable bond of trust with my Kubfu! We'll have a full evaluation for you next time, so please look forward to that. And if you're also sailing to the all-new Isle, appreciate that it marks a milestone in Poké history! **— LUCAS**

REVIEWS

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: LIGHTNING ROD GAMES
RATING: E

Puzzles as Pages

A FOLD APART

IF THE IMPENDING arrival of an origami-themed Paper Mario sequel has you pondering on the power of paper folding, then this is the indie appetizer for you. It takes a different approach to transforming the tangible action of folding paper into a gameplay activity, though, as A Fold Apart is a puzzler in which every scene plays out across double-sided flippable pages.

Have you ever been in a long-distance relationship? Even if not a romantic one, almost all of us can relate to the pain of physical separation from our loved ones here in the time of coronavirus social distancing. A Fold Apart tells the tale of two people struggling to deal with the distance between them. At first, they're living together and enjoying a picture-perfect life as a pair. But then one of them, an architect, gets offered a dream job: designing and overseeing the construction of a skyscraper . . . in a city several time zones away. The other, a teacher, has just landed a prime position at home and doesn't want to move. So the two separate, with the understanding that the architect will only be gone long enough to complete the building project and then will move right back home again.

. . . Things rarely go according to plan. Delays to the construction lead to tense text message exchanges between the once-idyllic lovers, and both of them descend into feelings of self-doubt, abandonment and loneliness as they drift further and further apart.

This is where the gameplay comes in: The mixed-up emotional mental state of both the architect and the teacher are represented as puzzles of folding paper. Your goal in each stage is to reach a star, and to do that you have to "fold" the screen over on top of itself to build a safe pathway to it.

It's difficult to explain in text, but if you're reading a physical copy of this issue, I can demonstrate the gameplay with this very page! Pick up the right edge of the paper in your hand and fold it over on itself. (Don't crease it!) There's a Shantae review on the opposite side of this same page. If you fold it over on itself, the text you're reading right now will disappear, replaced by text talking about the half-genie hero!

OK, it's not a perfect example, but hopefully you get the idea. Each level in A Fold Apart is set up similarly, in that your character will appear on one side of the "page" with some set of platforms or obstacles to begin with, and there will be other objects on the reverse side. You have to fold the stage over on top of itself in such a way that gaps disappear, blocks fall into place and the path forward presents itself plainly. The puzzles begin simply — one or two folds will be all they require — but as both characters fall down deeper into depression, the puzzles become more complex and chaotic. You ultimately end up folding stages from the left and right, up and down and each of the corners, as well as rotating them in circles to alter the pull of gravity! It's an inventive gameplay idea, and I enjoyed it for the most part.

Unfortunately, the story ends up getting in its way. The characters are so dour and melancholy toward the end of the tale that I just wanted to fast-forward through the actual game part to get to the resolution of it all! That's a shame, too, since the whole thing is over in just three or four hours. I appreciate that more and more indie games are endeavoring to tell meaningful stories alongside their gameplay, but man, I feel like they're all so depressing!

A Fold Apart probably isn't "fun" when it's all said and done. It is unique, though, and may give you a greater appreciation for your loved ones who live far away. **— LUCAS**

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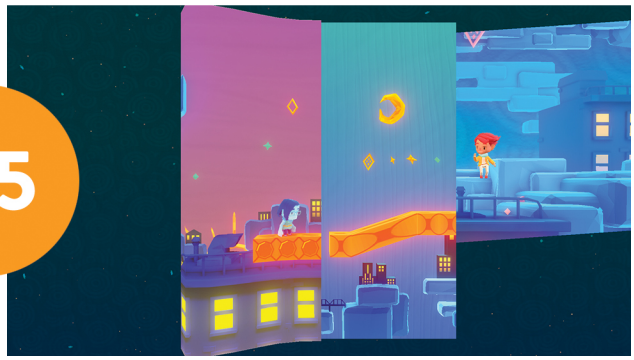

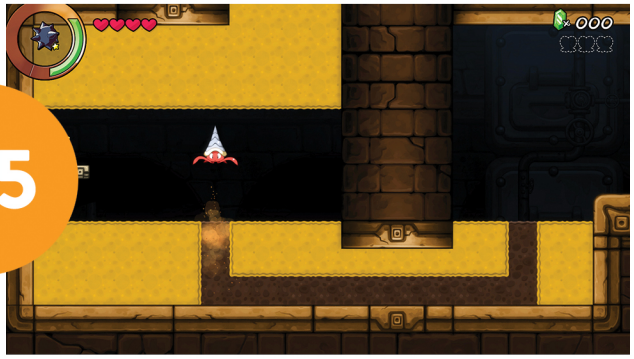

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A Return to Her Retro Roots

SHANTAE AND THE SEVEN SIRENS

THIS IS A very weird release indeed. Technically, Shantae and the Seven Sirens came out in late 2019, though the Switch port just recently arrived in May. Well, that's "half" true (excuse the cheekiness).

Initially, this fifth Shantae quest was released in two halves. Part 1 was exclusive to Apple Arcade, a new initiative for iOS that charges people a monthly subscription for premium games. Part 2 launched earlier this year in March. Confused yet? Well, a big bag of Apple money is probably to blame. Either way, Shantae and the Seven Sirens is finally out on every platform in its entirety . . . but it wasn't entirely worth the wait.

Moving away from the level-based approach of Pirate's Curse and Half-Genie Hero, Shantae and the Seven Sirens thankfully returns to the classic Metroidvania open-world approach — with mixed results. This is, in a word, the most "comfortable" iteration of Shantae yet. You have your main town hub world in the center of the map, with several other towns on the edges. There are teleportation rooms for fast traveling, and you're basically given free rein to explore, net secret items and farm cash for upgrades. It's very traditionally Shantae.

By and large, that's alright! Risky's Revenge is still my favorite Shantae to date, and I've been itching for WayForward to return to that formula for a long while now after experimenting with micro-sandboxes in the past two iterations. Cruising along with Shantae and effortlessly transforming into different forms is still very fun. It also doesn't hurt that it still looks gorgeous, and most of the cast is still lovable.

Yet, I can't help but feel a bit of fatigue this time around. Many of her powers are exactly the same as they've been in the past, and even a few of the "new" transformations feel like reworks of old concepts. WayForward also went overboard with healing items, providing way too many options that can be spammed at any given time.

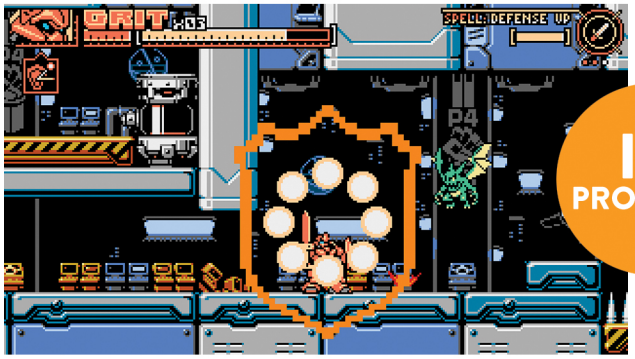
Bosses are also very hit-and-miss, with a few providing a sufficient challenge with a healthy dose of interesting mechanics, while others are tedious "when is it over" affairs. Only two bosses (a drill-based foe and the final encounter) truly felt special and in the spirit of Shantae — that includes the overused, Proto Man-esque Risky Boots.

With all that in mind, this is still a Shantae game made by WayForward, so there's a lot to love. Shantae and the Seven Sirens' platforming mechanics are more than competent, as the studio has become a master of the genre since its inception decades ago. The map is also easy to read at a glance, and doesn't contain too much fluff to the point where you'd get completely lost — a few times around the bend and you'll start to pick up noticeable characteristic landmarks.

I also appreciate the monster card system, which encourages players to farm foes (Castlevania-style) for new abilities that impact Shantae's transformations, spells and even locomotion. Even if a card isn't particularly useful, it's still fun to chase them and master ways to approach each enemy. Speaking of farming, in all, you're looking at around seven to 10 hours for a playthrough, with a New Game+ option that adds a new outfit and modified stats into the equation.

Shantae and the Seven Sirens is a fine Metroidvania, but one of the weaker Shantaes. By any measure, that's not an insult. **— CHRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD RATING: E10+



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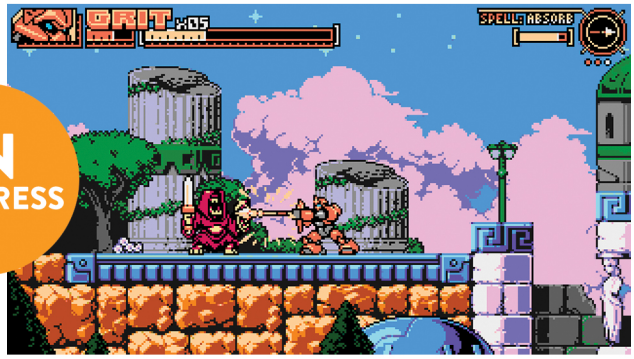


Slashter Master

PANZER PALADIN

TRIBUTE GAMES IS one of the few developers that feels true to its namesake. Their first release was a full-on love letter to the NES era (Ninja Senki), with a host of actual tributes that followed: Metal Slug; beat-'em-up classics; Breakout. Tribute Games has a very respectable little catalog at this point, full of retro-flavored games that still have their own "Tribute" verve to them. Panzer Paladin is no different.

You don't really need a big setup for this 2D platforming romp. There's no big Metroidvania-style map to navigate, nor are there lengthy cutscenes or excessive worldbuilding intros. Instead you basically jump right into the action in a giant mech, and the game displays "To Arms!", tasking you to destroy any demon in sight. It gets right down to business.

Panzer Paladin adapts a very straightforward 2D platformer movement system, as well as a classic NES downward thrust and rising uppercut. The robot also sports a shield and a peppy backstep to deal with projectiles (you can still look at fireballs and the like to block them while leaping back). Where Panzer Paladin veers off into a different direction is the focus on a Kirby-like weapon-swapping mechanic.

You aren't quite eating enemies here, but after destroying them they might drop a key piece of equipment to grab. Weapons are finite, with durability ratings and unique properties, and you'll encounter everything from basic swords to hockey sticks. Each type modifies your attack range and your arc, but not overly so to the point where you have to completely relearn basic combat concepts each time you swap. Breaking it down even further, you can consume these weapons to cast spells, adding a risk/reward type system to everything else.

Panzer Paladin is a constant cycle of destruction and renewal, as you can attempt to get attached to certain things (by casting a "durability up" spell on a weapon you like), or try out something new at pretty much any given moment. Sticking weapons into checkpoints as a "cost" is yet another interesting aspect of the risk-versus-reward blueprint. Oh, and I haven't even mentioned the ability to get out of your mech and walk around with a whip to navigate certain portions of each level — a flavorful mechanic that also serves as a "last chance" type of deal when your robot's health bar depletes.

It's telling that Tribute Games made this "break/fix" system fun pretty much at all times. Even without any weapons, your hero is still fairly strong and has access to a great base kit of abilities. Whereas some games let durability completely dictate the experience, Panzer Paladin merely adopts it as an extra layer of mechanical fluff.

Given how smooth Panzer Paladin plays, going through the game is breezy. It's level-based, but gives you the option to tackle 10 levels across a literal world map right away, which will lead to Mega Man comparisons (a series Tribute Games has openly fawned over in the past). There's also a light upgrade system achieved through donating weapons, three difficulty levels available from the start (which can be swapped), a blacksmith tool to rework your own items and a remix mode.

There's a whole lot to love here if you even remotely like classic 2D platformers. It's safe to say that Panzer Paladin is a quality throwback, able to maintain its own identity while feeling authentically retro. However, we're leaving this review as an unfinished "In Progress" for now, since we've only tested out the PC edition so far. Stay tuned to find out if the Switch port has any unforeseen issues — though I don't foresee it having any. (. . . Wait a sec.) **— CHRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: TRIBUTE GAMES RATING: T

7.5

Gainful Employment

GOOD JOB!

CAN WORK BE as fun as play? It can — but only if you have a few fun coworkers to make it that way.

Nintendo's bringing promising indie games under the first-party publishing umbrella more and more frequently, and Paladin Studios' Good Job! is the latest in this line. It casts you as an up-and-coming employee literally rising through the ranks at a company housed in a 10-story building. You begin at the bottom, are assigned tasks to complete on each floor and, as you accomplish them, you're promoted and given access to the next floor up in the structure. Can you work your way all the way up to the penthouse?

It's a simple and understandable career path — but often complicated and confusing in each individual task. Good Job! is one part puzzler and one part playground, with goofy physics in play to elevate mundane assignments like sorting boxes or polishing floors into hilarious comedies of errors. Need to move a PowerPoint projector into a meeting room for your boss? You could slowly walk it through doors, pulling it patiently around cubicles and trying to avoid disrupting any other employees along the way. Or you could use a conveniently placed elastic power cord to slingshot the thing like a cannonball, sending it sailing straight to its destination and smashing through walls and windows in its way!

Egregious, intentional property damage like that is encouraged in Good Job!, as the constantly ticking-away clock on the screen tries to motivate you to complete your jobs as quickly as possible, no matter how haphazardly. And that's where a ton of the game's fun comes from . . . if you have an audience.

As is frequently the case in the Thomas household, my sons sat and watched as I put Good Job! through its paces — and like the similarly goofy Donut County and Untitled Goose Game before it, this game met with their approval and earned hearty laughter from them every time I did something like fling a businessman down a hallway in a rolling chair or knock over a huge tower of crates with a forklift. Putting smiles on my sons' faces always puts a smile on mine as well, so that's where this game shines.

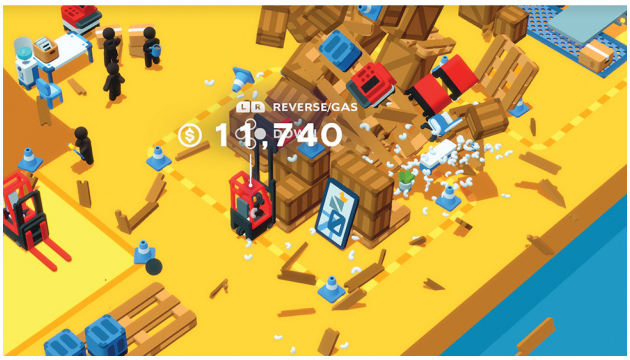
Unfortunately, that also means it's not nearly as entertaining when played alone. Some parts of this campaign I tackled solo, and even the most over-the-top on-screen antics only inspire a slim grin when Carter and Calvin aren't cackling at them. Kids make it much better!

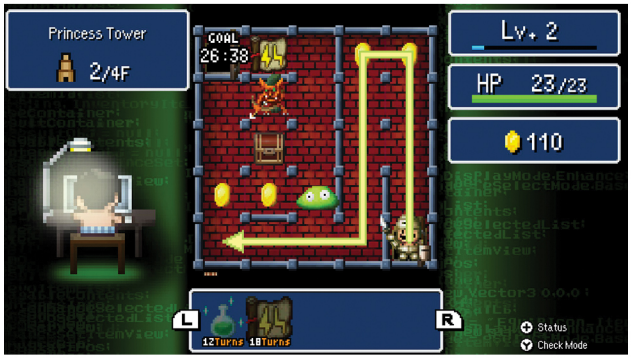
. . . But then there's another issue to address: the obtuseness of some of the game's puzzles. Each level has a different objective, but it's not always obvious what it is that you're supposed to do. So several minutes' worth of play time in these levels is spent just wandering around and trying to puzzle out the goal — and that's boring to watch. I like a good head-scratcher and don't mind having to figure things out in a puzzle game when I'm playing alone, but I don't care for it when I'm playing the game as a source of visual entertainment for others. The game is working against itself in that regard.

Good Job! also presents a mixed message with all its physics-fueled destruction too. Smashing this office building to bits is the most fun thing to do in the game, but when you complete a level you're penalized based on the total monetary value of all the things you trashed. So, what, am I *not* supposed to make everything explode? The way to the best level ratings is to play as quickly but as blandly as possible, I guess.

Throw in some sometimes wonky controls and Good Job! is a game that ends up missing out on greatness. Perhaps appropriately, it is merely a "good" game. **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: PALADIN STUDIOS
RATING: E





Double Dungeon

DANDY DUNGEON I & II

MAKING GAMES IS hard, but anything can be fun if you turn it into a game. That's why Ring Fit Adventure is still sold out everywhere, and why exercise apps that tell you that you're being chased by zombies make millions every year. This brings us to Yamada, the 36-year-old star of Dandy Dungeon. He also wants to make an app, but he's struggling. Sheltering at home, he sits at his computer in his underwear day and night, toiling away, alone. How does he do it without losing his mind? He makes game development into a game, and you're the one who gets to play it.

Created by Yoshiro Kimura (see Page 62), Dandy Dungeon feels autobiographical. Kimura might even be heard singing on the game's soundtrack! As he told us in his interview, he got his start in the industry at Square back in the '90s, so it's no surprise that Dandy Dungeon feels like a personal reflection on the 16-bit JRPG genre that Kimura himself helped create.

The main difference is how you get around. You traverse battlefields by drawing a single continuous line on the screen, then you watch your player (a little warrior version of Yamada) follow your path as he engages in turn-based battles with the monsters in his way. You can control what items he uses as he moves toward the exit, but other than that, you don't have any real work to do. If only real game development were this easy!

It's an ingeniously simple design, but packed with variables. As you progress, you unlock various stores (including an online shopping site called Mamazon.mom), gain help from local beggars and discover multiple bonus dungeons, some of which are very well hidden. There are hundreds of items to collect, including weapons, spells, armor and, in time, even pets. Armor comes in sets, so if you pair the right items together, you not only look cooler, but you also get added bonuses like double attacks or doing extra damage to certain enemy types.

You'll need the help, too, as the difficulty ramps up quickly. You can only carry five items with you at any given time, so choosing which spells to bring to a new dungeon (which range between three and 99 floors in depth) will make or break you. The original version of the game was a free mobile app that charged real money for continues. In this Switch revamp, you have to find or buy continues with in-game currency — but they're often in short supply. Here's a quick tip: Make sure to grind at the Sliamond's Tower once you unlock it. It's a great place to get rice balls.

That's the kind of advice you'll need to survive to the end of Dandy Dungeon. This is especially true after you get through the first game and unlock Dandy Dungeon II, which is much harder, consisting of both regular dungeons and special "themed" areas strewn across a Tokyo subway line. This is also where you discover the Hentai district, a place I did not expect to see in an E-rated game. Also unexpected is the appearance of Nobuo Uematsu, the legendary video game music composer, who appears as a hidden boss wearing nothing but a fig leaf! It almost makes sense in context, but not quite. (He also contributed some music to the soundtrack, which is fantastic.)

If you don't like grinding, Dandy Dungeon will start to frustrate you after five hours or so. But if you play at your own pace, make liberal use of the fast-forward button and remember that it's just a game, it can offer you tens, maybe even hundreds of hours of fun!

— JONATHAN

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: ONION GAMES RATING: E

9.0

A New Bare Knuckle Brawl

STREETS OF RAGE 4

IT'S BEEN 26 years since the last Streets of Rage was released, but it's not as though there haven't been efforts to revive the franchise in the past quarter-century. Other companies, Sega and even groups of fans have all tried to pick up the torch in some capacity, but for one reason or another, things just never came together.

That is, until Dotemu, Lizardcube (the guys who remade Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap a few years ago) and Guard Crush Games came together. Whether it was the right pitch at the right time or someone at Sega just figured it's been long enough already, Streets of Rage 4 is now a reality. And it feels so, so right.

Where to begin? Well, for starters, it hasn't been quite as long for the people of Wood Oak City as it has been in real life since Streets of Rage 3 – only about 10 years. Things calmed down for a while, but now the children of the nefarious Mr. X, the Y Twins, have taken control of a new crime syndicate and have a nasty plan for the citizens that must be stopped. That's where street-raging veterans Blaze Fielding and Axel Stone come in, and they're joined by newcomers Cherry Hunter, the speedy guitarist daughter of original SoR favorite Adam (who is unlockable), and Dr. Zan's cybernetically enhanced apprentice, Floyd.

The art is something to behold, with a smooth, hand-drawn fluidity that pays respect to the original manga-styled concept art for the Genesis titles, and various effects such as dynamic lighting help to further bring the world to life. While the Streets of Rage 3 soundtrack was a bit ahead of its time, Streets of Rage 4's tunes feel like they've been dialed back to be a little more in keeping with what fans came to know and love from the second entry in the series.

In terms of gameplay, what's here feels solidly familiar, yet more advanced in some ways than what came before it. More buttons are available for those who prefer individual functions to button combinations, or if you think three is enough, you can go with Legacy Mode. Possibly the biggest change is in the combo system and how it relates to performing special moves.

It's common for special moves in brawlers to drain a bit of your health as you use them, and that remains true here. However, if you can keep up the punishment without being hit again yourself, you'll regain the spent health, adding a little bit of strategy to the proceedings. Helping further add to these combos, the bad guys have lost a key tactical advantage: being knocked off the screen. Now your borders are their borders, as they get juggled into the air and bounce off the edge of the screen, right back into another kick or uppercut. It feels so good, and so satisfying.

Strangely, the Switch version in particular won't let you remap anything to the shoulder triggers (where Back-Attack is in other versions), and that threw me off a little. You can remap it at the system level, thanks to Nintendo's recent update, but should you have to? The cutscenes featured throughout left the ending feeling a little lacking to me, and among the unlockable characters, there were some puzzling omissions. These are relatively minor gripes, though.

It's a very good, strong revival of a franchise that's gone for far too long without a new entry. If you're a fan of beat-'em-ups, then definitely check this one out. **– DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DOTEMU
DEVELOPERS: DOTEMU, LIZARDCUBE & GUARD CRUSH GAMES
RATING: T

If Mallrats Got an NES Game

JAY AND SILENT BOB: MALL BRAWL

IF PATRICK SWAYZE riding a horse out of a pet store called Gerbils Gerbils Gerbils is a reference you understand, and you also happen to be a big fan of NES-era brawlers, go ahead and tack another point onto this game's score, because it was made specifically for you. Everybody else, read on.

Mall Brawl is an 8-bit-inspired beat-'em-up that attempts to make a game out of Kevin Smith's Askewniverse. Mallrats is the source for the game's setting and story, but eagle-eyed fans will also spot references to Clerks (the cartoon and the movie), Dogma, Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back and more. It's a perfectly competent brawler that largely plays like a combination of the three NES Double Dragon games.

There's a pretty big difference between playing solo or with a friend. In two player co-op, each player chooses their fighter and brawls until their health runs out. However, there are no lives. Instead, there's a sort of "cool down" system in place. When one player runs out of health, they disappear and their energy slowly recovers off-screen. Once they regain enough, as long as the other player is still alive and kicking, they get to jump back in. If you both get knocked out, it's Game Over.

Single player works more like a tag team match. You can swap between Jay and Bob as many times as you want, with the off-screen fighter slowly regenerating health as you go. This gives the game an unexpected layer of strategy, and can really extend your play time, which is welcome — because Mall Brawl can be rather challenging!

Like the NES games it draws its inspiration from, there are rarely, if ever, more than two enemies on the screen at a time, but those enemies can be ruthless. Not just because they have devastating movesets, but because it's really easy to get yourself trapped punching the wrong direction, or getting unfairly ganged up on. It really does play like an NES game, which, while respectably authentic, can be a double-edged sword.

Nowhere is this more egregious than in the Battletoads-inspired shopping cart stage. This is a play on Turbo Tunnel, except it doesn't give you any indication of what's coming ahead of you, so it turns into a long, tedious memorization process. And even once it's memorized, executing it quickly becomes an exercise in frustration, especially with two players!

That aside, Mall Brawl has a lot going for it. It's not exactly overflowing with content, but it isn't short either. There's even a "second quest" you can embark on once you finish the main campaign, though I have to admit I wasn't exactly inspired to get very far into it. The jokes and references aren't as special a second time around, and without that novelty, Mall Brawl isn't quite compelling enough to warrant a second run — at least not right away.

It may not be perfect, but if you're a fan of the source material, it's well worth the price of admission. So grab a sock full of quarters, take a run at LaFours, and try not to pull your back out. Nootch. **— KRIS**

6.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: THE MEDIA INDIE EXCHANGE
DEVELOPER: INTERABANG ENT. RATING: E10+

The Neo Geo Pocket Color Lives!

SNK GALS' FIGHTERS

8.0

THE "WOMEN'S FIGHTING GAME" sub-genre is doing great these days, with titles like Skullgirls, Blade Strangers and SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy making waves with critics and players alike. But before they came along, there was a little Neo Geo Pocket Color game called SNK Gals' Fighters that dared to buck trends with its majority female cast.

Keep in mind that this was in the year 2000, just two years after Nintendo's own "Will you get the girl, or fight like one?" ad campaign for Ocarina of Time that willfully alienated about half of the world's population. Casual sexism was commonplace in gaming back then, but SNK Gals' Fighters was willing to go the uncommon path with a title that refused to objectify or belittle the bulk of its roster.

Each of the 11 playable characters here has their own distinct look, personality and fighting style, and next to none of them buy into stereotypes about "the fairer sex." That's not the only way the game dared to innovate. Athena, one of the most popular characters in the SNK fighting world, has a move in which she uses her male companion Kensou as a shield. (This was a year before Peach used the exact same move with Toad in 2001's Super Smash Bros. Melee.) Rarely has a game been so trailblazingly feminist while working to set back fungus-man rights by centuries at the same time.

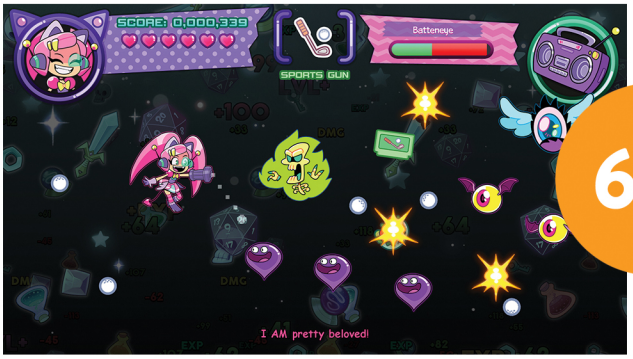
As the game was originally released on a console with just two buttons, it has a simple control scheme but a fair amount of depth, and plenty of special moves per character. You have one button for kick, the other for punch, and pressing them together gives you a quick roll that can be used to rushdown or retreat. It's a surprisingly combo-heavy game with charming, expressive visuals. Classic squash-and-stretch animation techniques do a lot to help these relatively short-limbed characters spring to life and pack a wallop.

Though the game is far from huge, it'll still take you a while to master every fighter. Most hail from other SNK franchises like Fatal Fury, The King of Fighters, Samurai Shodown and The Last Blade. Three of them are secret characters, two of them are pretty hard to unlock and one of them is only playable here! There are also a bunch of in-game items to unlock and other little perks to keep you going. One of my favorites is the special animation that plays if you beat an opponent with a super move. If you can pull it off, you get to see their lives literally flash before their eyes, using unique graphics that look far more realistic than anything else found in the game.

Gals' Fighters is a fun little competitive romp, a unique part of the history of fighting games and a heartfelt love letter to SNK all in one. Just make sure you have at least one local friend to play with if you want to get your money's worth, as there's no online mode to keep you coming back, and the single-player unlocks don't last forever.

Here's hoping this is just the beginning of the Neo Geo Pocket Color library being revived! It's been left back in the past for far too long. **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SNK
RATING: E10+



6.0

No Foolin'

CAT GIRL WITHOUT SALAD: AMUSE-BOUCHE

THIS GAME IS a joke. Literally, an April Fools' joke made real!

On April 1, 2013, WayForward announced Cat Girl Without Salad, an impossible mash-up of every conceivable genre from real-time strategy to visual novel. Like true comedy professionals, WayForward remained committed to the bit over subsequent years, addressing all inquiries into the obviously fake title with sly smiles and vague reassurances. Three years later, Humble Bundle announced that subscribers would receive an extra special bonus in the June lineup: Cat Girl Without Salad! And those who missed out on the limited-time offer got another opportunity the following year when it was added to the Humble Trove catalog.

Now Switch owners get to partake in the totally down-to-earth tale of Kebako, a former pop idol/renowned chef who decides to become an intergalactic bounty hunter. With her partner Squiddie on comms, the fickle feline femme travels the cosmos in search of criminals in need of a little pew pew!

Though scaled back significantly from the original "everything plus the kitchen sink" concept, Cat Girl Without Salad nonetheless finds ways to blur genre lines. It's a horizontal shmup at its core, but by picking up Gun Cartridges, Kebako can swap out her Pea Shooter for something less conventional. Like the Puzzle Gun that fires orbs that clear the screen when three colors match, or the impractical Dance Gun that demands that you tap face buttons in time with scrolling DDR arrows while still dodging enemy fire! Shamefully, the fun rarely lasts long, as it's back to your weak-sauce arm cannon after a single hit.

The big highlight is the constant banter between Kebako, Squiddie and their targets. Our heroine is . . . well . . . she's dumb, and rather selfish to boot. She's off in her own little pun-filled world, doing whatever she pleases without much thought to the people she hurts along the way. Heck, the game even grants a Cruelty Bonus for destroying the peace offerings gifted by the defeated and remorseful bounties! But no need to dwell too long on Kebako's errant behavior, as the bright colors and poppy Jake Kaufman soundtrack are intended to make you feel warm and fuzzy inside!

Here's the kicker, though: Cat Girl Without Salad was never meant to be a complete package; merely a fun reward for fans' enduring interest in that original prank! It's a simple diversion that barely crosses the half-hour mark, with bog-standard shmup action and Saturday morning humor that don't lend well to repeat playthroughs. That was fine back when the game was a giveaway as part of a larger software suite, but in the leap to Switch, it acquired a $7.99 price tag, which is too much for such a fleeting experience. "Amuse-Bouche" actually means "a small complimentary appetizer." As in this game ought to be free, or at least as close to free as possible!

But there is a Sephiroth parody named Chefinoff, and that's enough to give it a pass in my book. **— TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD RATING: E10+

Time to Lose Consciousness

SEGA AGES: G-LOC AIR BATTLE

WHEN IT COMES to Sega and the thrill of taking to the cockpit of a fighter jet and blasting one enemy after another out of the sky, one name comes to mind: After Burner. That said, if you're a fan of that series (and if you've never played it, there's a nice version in the 3D Classics line in the 3DS eShop), then there may be another game you'd be interested in strapping in for, and that's G-LOC Air Battle.

Viewed unofficially as either a spin-off or spiritual sequel to Sega's Tomcat twister, G-LOC (which stands for "Loss Of Consciousness by G-Force") mixes things up a bit by zooming in from behind the plane and placing you right in the cockpit of the experimental Sega Wing Carrier Fighter A8M5 Mk II, code-named "ZEEK." From there, it's largely similar in scope, as you fly along the map and take on different missions to shoot a certain number of land, sea or air-based enemies before time runs out — or, alternatively, you find yourself grounded the hard way.

A key component is locking on to enemies before letting loose with your arsenal of missiles, but if you run out, your trusty (but less powerful) Vulcan can pick up the slack. Of course, enemies aren't the only ones being targeted, as they'll lock on to you as well, with the view pulling out of the cockpit so you can perform evasive maneuvers and get those bogeys off your six.

This is a port of the arcade game, rather than the later home ports, so it's designed to munch some quarters. While the game offers you three flight paths of varying difficulty and length from which to choose by default, you can select from five difficulty settings in the various menus M2 has graced us with. That is, if you're playing Arcade Mode. If you opt for Ages Mode, you'll be dropped into a special one-and-done run of the game with one credit, no continues and one difficulty setting with even more enemies. Fortunately, you're also equipped with even more missiles and a more powerful lock-on system to try to get the job done.

As is typical for the Sega Ages series, M2 has provided oodles of display settings and options to tweak to your liking, but for G-LOC, they've added a little something beyond the norm. G-LOC was originally an arcade game that had a variety of different cabinets, including some in which you could sit as they moved around with the gameplay. While this home version of the game is unable to replicate that kind of full 360-degree motion, there are some border display options that do their best to give you some idea of what it was like to feel the Gs in person at your local arcade in 1990. If that, combined with the game's already hectic movement, is too much for you, then there's also the Cockpit display option, which gives the ambience without the need (or at least less of the need) to reach for a barf bag.

Until they decide to tackle virtual reality, this release is the best way to preserve and play a piece of arcade history. (Try not to pass out.) **— DAVID**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPERS: SEGA & M2 RATING: E10+

Home to Arcade to Home

SEGA AGES: THUNDER FORCE AC

ESCHEWING THE NORM of home ports following arcade releases, Thunder Force AC represented the reverse: It was an arcade remake of Thunder Force III for the Sega Genesis. Now, it's back in our living rooms again as the second in the series to receive a Sega Ages release, following Lightening Force (a.k.a. Thunder Force IV).

Thunder Force AC is a horizontal shoot-'em-up featuring eight levels of pure action as you, piloting the Federation's last hope in the FIRE LEO-03 STYX fighter, try to tip the scales in the losing battle against the ORN Empire. "Wielding the same amount of firepower as a large battleship," the STYX does indeed pack an impressive amount of firepower — should you pick up all the options and power-ups to bring it fully to bear.

You can choose between the five different weapons arrays available to you anytime at the press of a button, but if you end up on the receiving end of some ORN ordnance, you'll lose the equipped weapon. In addition, you can similarly adjust the speed of your craft among four settings, allowing experts to zip through tight squeezes and the more cautious-minded to slow down in order to pick up one of the many items lingering far too close to obstacles that will ground your craft.

It can be a difficult journey, but M2 has equipped the Sega Ages version of the game with enough options to satisfy players of all skill levels. In addition to being able to choose from four difficulty settings, there's also a new Kids Mode that makes enemies weaker and shots slower — and you also won't lose the currently equipped weapon when you die. Grab the Hunter weapon, and it *almost* turns the whole affair into "hold B to win," but stops just short of that.

Suffice it to say, the various tweaks should be enough to satisfy newcomers, those who like shooters while not being very good at them or experts who want to crank things up and show the rest of us how it's really done.

There's replay value here, too, in the form of unlockable ships from throughout the series. Some changes are minor, such as another version of the STYX equipped with a back-blast when changing speeds that can be used to damage enemies for additional points; while others, such as the Rynex from Lightening Force, include a different loadout of weapons (the Blade gun is great).

Of course, being a Sega Ages title, you can expect to find all of the usual additions here, from borders (including one mimicking the arcade setting), filters, screen ratios and even the ability to turn stereo sound on or off. Oh, and naturally, your high scores get posted to online leaderboards.

And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that this game has *the most* Engrishy ending I've ever seen in my life. It might even make the infamous Zero Wing blush!

Whether you're a diehard fan of the genre or just like to dip your toe in on occasion, Sega Ages: Thunder Force AC is a worthy game to grab. **— DAVID**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPERS: TECHNOSOFT & M2 RATING: E

Paying Homage to Paper Mario's Past

BUG FABLES: THE EVERLASTING SAPLING

I WENT THROUGH several phases when playing this game — much like some bugs! In the earliest phase (or egg phase), I was very skeptical, thinking the game just used the Paper Mario style to get noticed. That may still be somewhat true, reflecting on the game in general, as the game never addresses its paper look, nor does it play with the idea of these being flat "paper" bugs.

In fact, the style is done so well that I wondered early on if it was just a reskin — some areas seemed vaguely familiar and the structure of the game followed the same flow as the original Paper Mario. Even the battles are very similar to Paper Mario! But that's by design, to scratch a certain itch Nintendo has seemed to be ignoring for a while.

The game does take a while to get going, and it feels like the story has been going on a while when you start. That adds to the intrigue and is smartly executed, as the backstories of each character are filled in through gameplay.

After a couple of chapters you really get into the groove of the game, so we'll call that the larval stage. You meet Leif, start facing tougher enemies and get the hang of battle while your horizons are broadened by visiting new and unique areas.

The settings of each chapter are smart and fit the world well — while not being the same tired locations we see so often in video games. A beehive, a sandbox, a hubcap, a tire and tall grass are some of the areas you'll visit, and each species that lives there is different and represented well. Ants, bees, termites, wasps and more have gained sentience and technology in this world, while the monsters are the spiders, weevils, snails and midges that have not. Some flora also attack you, like seeds, plants and mushrooms.

The characters really gel with each other, and the game sets you up to believe the narrative is going one way, then goes another. It's very well written. You really want to know if Vi will grow as a bee, learn Kabbu's origin and solve the enigma of Leif.

Then comes the pupa phase, where things in the game slow down and lose the flow. It's still interesting from a narrative standpoint, but you keep getting sent back to the Lost Sands to take different paths, and it grates.

Another odd tick is how quickly enemies become obsolete. After an area is complete, you get significantly fewer exploration points (your EXP) even though the enemies can still be difficult to defeat and may even cause significant damage. This is why the "Bug Me Not" medal is crucial. Sidequests range from super important — where you get new techniques or medals that make the game much more convenient — to ones that just yield a few berries.

The game can be very stingy with berries, but there are a few places to

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DANGEN ENT. DEVELOPER: MOONSPROUT GAMES RATING: E

THE BROTHERLY BEETLE OF BATTLE

KABBU

The humble and soft-spoken Kabbu can be equal parts tank and teddy bear. He will always attempt to use words before violence, but can definitely hold his own in a fight. Loyal to his friends, his queen and Venus, he honors his past by fighting for the future. Kabbu uses his horn as his weapon, and he uses it to flip enemies and expose weaknesses. He's stronger than his allies, but would never boast about that to them — especially not Vi. His personality makes more sense once you learn his origin, which he is very secretive about.

STINGING WITH WORDS & WEAPONS

VI

Violet the bee is a greedy little bug that goes by Vi. She's sassy, she never lets an opportunity to share her opinion pass her by, and she loathes authority. Tact is not her strong suit, and she will often discuss the reward before any action is taken, much to the dismay of Kabbu. She is formidable in battle and confident in her team, and she matures steadily through the coaxing of her comrades. Her Beemerang attacks are critical to dropping flying foes, and she's a good healer. She gets into plenty of trouble, but always gets out!

farm them. There are very few places in the game to grind, and when I did find one in the Wasp stronghold, I may have broken the game somewhat. I always had the Bug Me Not medal on, but after I gained some levels there, the new enemies in new areas after that were not strong enough to attack me on the map. It was an exploit that certainly moved things along quicker — but it felt like I was cheating.

Item management can be tedious, and gathering items to set out can be rough, since certain things are only sold in specific areas. The ants provide tunnels to new areas, but it can still take 10 or so minutes of gathering items, storing items for space and going to the right chef to prepare them. Since you'll be going to these places anyway, it's worth the time to do sidequests.

I like the style of sidequests the game provides, but I can see where others may not, as it requires significant backtracking. Often a new technique can be used to find new areas and treasures, and the exploration can be fun. Rank-ups feel incremental, but some bonuses are given out. Team points are odd because they don't really involve team members until late in the game.

All of these little complaints are inconsequential in the greater scheme of things.

Then we move on to the final phase — or adult phase — of the game, where things get seriously tough. The last area tested the limits of my battle skills, my inventory management and my patience. I won't spoil too much, but it was a good challenge and I thoroughly enjoyed the ending. Then you realize all you've been through with these great characters who you really end up caring for, and it almost seems like the last fourth of the game goes by too fast. There are very funny moments, very touching ones and very tense ones.

After doing everything in the game, I ended up clocking around 40 hours, and I rarely do that unless I really enjoy a game. I imagine if I skipped all the extras it would be around 20 to 25 hours long.

Bug Fables: The Everlasting Sapling shattered my skepticism through its amazing main characters, quirky NPCs, challenging battles and interesting locales, and I sincerely hope more players will give it a shot.

And if you're not convinced, then bug off! **— BRETT**

THE MAGICAL MOTH OF MYSTERY

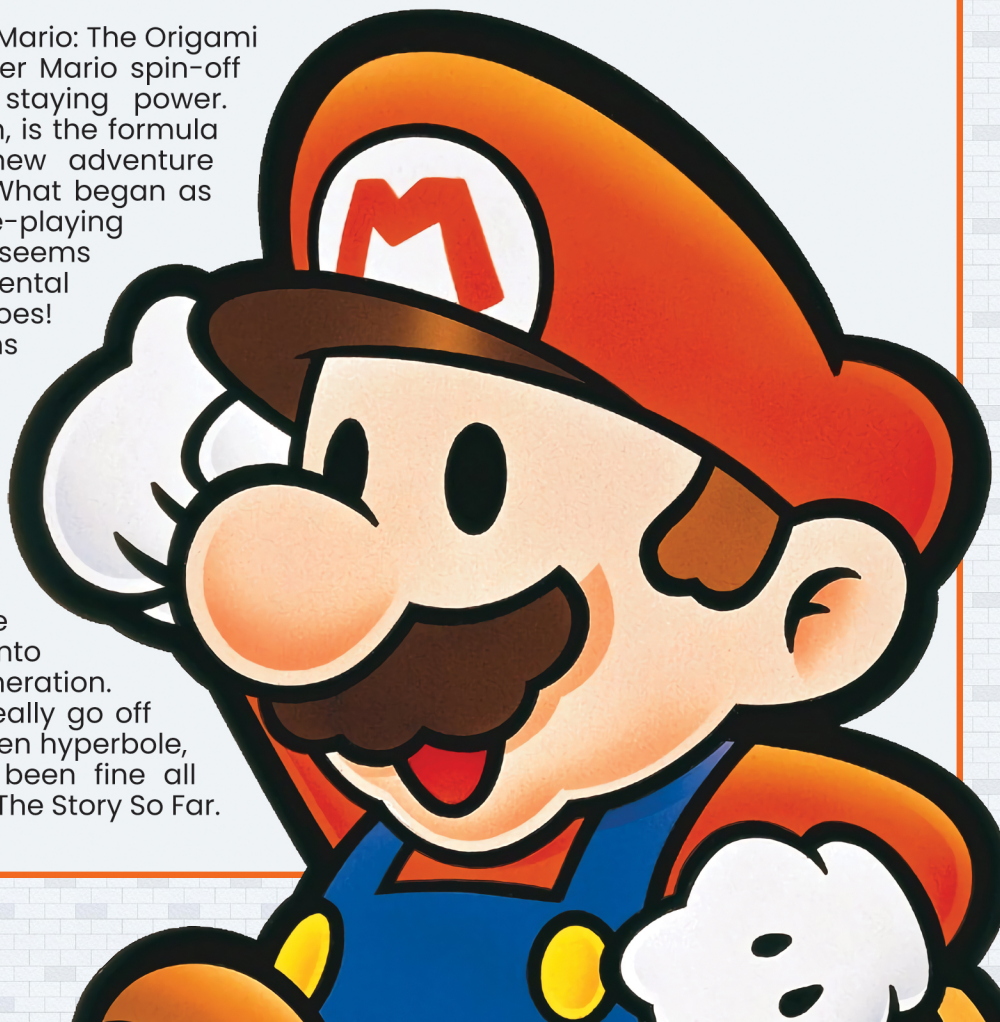
LEIF

Lastly, Leif is a mystery wrapped in an enigma stuffed into a moth. After you rescue him from a spider, you learn that he is from a time forgotten. So forgotten that nobody is sure what happened! He can use ice magic and is essential to traversing the map in so many ways, from his bubble shield to his ice platforms. Reserved, wise and generally reluctant, Leif chooses to join the team to seek out answers to his past. Being a moth out of time, he can be disgruntled about his situation, but is usually polite and intimidating in battle.

PAPER MARIO

THE STORY SO FAR

WITH THE REVEAL of Paper Mario: The Origami King, this role-playing Super Mario spin-off series has solidified its staying power. What's not so solid, though, is the formula used to prepare each new adventure starring this happy hero. What began as a brand firmly rooted in role-playing has now evolved into what seems to be a purely experimental series in which anything goes! . . . And many long-time fans of the brand are certainly not too fond of its recent reality. So let's flip back to the beginning and trace the Paper Mario timeline game by game, to help us contextualize where we stand now, at this moment in time, on the verge of the series' arrival into another new hardware generation. At what point did things really go off the rails? Or has that all been hyperbole, and Paper Mario's really been fine all along? This is Paper Mario: The Story So Far.



MAY 13, 1996

PLAYING IT TODAY

This Paper Mario predecessor has been profilic and plentiful in the past 24 years, having been made available for download on both Wii and Wii U, as well as included in the lineup of 21 hits selected for 2017's SNES Classic Edition. It's not too tough to track down, so do so!

SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS

MARIO AND ROLE-PLAYING games go together like peanut butter and chocolate. And the reason we understand this truth is the flavor bomb known as Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars!

As prolific as the RPG genre is today, there was a time when its menu-based gameplay didn't attract much of a global audience. During the 16-bit era, lofty critical praise for the likes of Square's Final Fantasy III (a.k.a. VI) and Chrono Trigger never quite translated to sales. This bothered Square's top brass enough that they sought assistance from a certain mustachioed icon so beloved that his mere presence would convince role-playing newbies to plunge into the realm of stats and EXP.

To ensure this partnership with Nintendo bore fruit, Square appealed to Mario players' sensibilities. Instead of their usual top-down view, they chose an isometric perspective that allowed for some light platforming. Rather than traditional spritework, they aped Donkey Kong Country's pre-rendered graphics to stand apart visually from the rest of the SNES library.

The biggest accommodation was the timed input system to make fights more active than your typical turn-based RPG. What platformer expat wants to wait while their on-screen avatars execute dazzling stunts on auto-pilot? In Super Mario RPG, pushing the jump button precisely as Mario stomped on an enemy's noggin granted a follow-up stomp . . . then another . . . and another . . . and so on for as long as you could maintain the rhythm. You could turn the tide of battle by racking up incredible combos!

And let's not ignore the characters, dripping with charm with every utterance! Bowser, who reluctantly joined Mario's party and revealed himself to be a big softy in the process! Geno, the living puppet sorcerer who gained a staunch following that persists to this day! The Axem Rangers, Power Ranger knockoffs who oppose your crew in a most flamboyant fashion! Never before had the Mushroom Kingdom felt so alive, so awash with friends and foes, old and new, who touched our hearts and tickled our funny bones!

It comes as no surprise that Super Mario RPG went on to become Square's best-selling game in the West up until that point. The future of Square and Nintendo's union was bright indeed! But then PlayStation happened, and . . . well . . . so long, Square. If Nintendo hoped to keep the Mario RPG train running, they'd be forced to go in a different direction. **– TONY**

PAPER MARIO

THE STORY BEHIND Mario's first foray into papercraft is one that begins with betrayal: Square, the team behind the original Super Mario RPG, famously decided to develop exclusively for Sony during the 32/64-bit era. While this meant PlayStation gamers got to enjoy Final Fantasy FMVs, Nintendo had to fly solo on an SMRPG sequel. Thus, Intelligent Systems took the reins in creating a brand-new style of Mario RPG for the Nintendo 64.

Scour the letters section of a Nintendo Power from that era and you'll quickly learn that the reveal of Paper Mario's flat style was extremely controversial. ("The graphics look worse than South Park!" one reader lamented.) But like Wind Waker after it, the unique, cartoony art style has arguably held up better than a lot of games of that era, and it also speaks to the series' more straightforward approach to RPG design. Stats are simplified down to the essentials, and while timed hits make a return from SMRPG, damage is doled out in single-digit portions (at the beginning of the game, your most effective attacks deal a whopping 2 HP of pain!). Your other playable characters, likewise, can only accompany you one at a time and don't even have their own HP meters. Between this and the totally back-to-basics plot of Bowser kidnapping Peach and threatening the Mushroom Kingdom, how could this title possibly live up to its more complex predecessor?

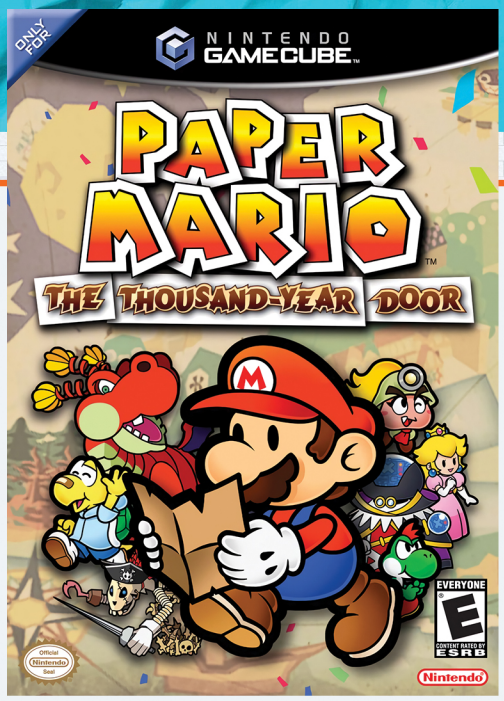
And yet . . . it did. Thanks to tight balancing, the simplification of everything actually made battles that much more engaging. Like a game of chess, you can plan out moves and attacks turns in advance because of how purely *precise* everything is. Each of Mario's moves – and his partners' – are effective in their own specific ways, and using them perfectly to minimize your damage taken is always an enjoyable challenge. Throw in some tangible benefits with each level-up (boosting your HP by five when you start off with only 10 is a significant upgrade) and the fantastic customization of the badge system, and you've got a surprisingly fresh flavor of RPG that can be enjoyed by just about anyone.

The paper aspect is less pronounced than in later games (its original name of "Mario Story" would have fully downplayed it), but that allows the solid writing and characters to stand on their own merits. Give this game a shot, even if you've played its more popular sequel! There's plenty to like here and it's still my personal favorite of all the Mario RPGs. **– MATTHEW T.**

FEBRUARY 5, 2001

PLAYING IT TODAY

The official origin point of the Paper Mario series is nearly 20 years old now, but it's thankfully been sold in three different ways and can be played today without much hassle. Original Nintendo 64 cartridges are still on sale in retro gaming shops. It was sold as a Virtual Console game on the Wii, but the Wii Shop is now shut down. The Wii U eShop is still active, though, and it's also available there! So that's a digital solution if you can't make the tangible cart materialize. It's only $9.99, too!



OCTOBER 11, 2004

PLAYING IT TODAY

The best game in the series is also the most difficult to play today, and that's a major source of fans' frustration with the series as a whole! The Thousand-Year Door is only playable via GameCube disc. Perhaps someday Nintendo will listen to the fans' demand for a remake or remastered version!

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR

IF THE GAMECUBE could be seen as a Nintendo 64 with the dial turned up, then the same could be said of The Thousand-Year Door alongside its predecessor, the original Paper Mario. TTYD (as it's affectionately known) follows a lot of the same beats as the original, but in an adventure that feels bigger, greater, and just simply more.

Like many a Mario sequel before it, TTYD expands the scope of Mario's world by going beyond the confines of the Mushroom Kingdom to a new locale: the town of Rogueport, a wretched hive of scum and villainy that, when you begin to pull back the layers, becomes one of the most charming and endearing settings Mario has ever set foot in.

You don't just explore Rogueport, however, as Mario's quest is to find Princess Peach and gather the seven Crystal Stars before a new gang of villains, the X-Nauts, can use them to open the titular door for their own sinister purposes. The adventure not only takes you from the Koopa Troopa-populated town of Petalburg to the mysterious Boggly Woods and even to the moon, but also on a mystery-filled ride aboard the Excess Express and, best of all, on the path to superstardom in a series of wrestling matches to claim championship gold from the immortal Rawk Hawk in the Glitz Pit.

As this is going on, Bowser isn't just cooling his heels – he gets involved once he learns of Peach's abduction, as "Under no circumstances is ANYONE allowed to kidnap her without MY say-so!!!". This leads to several sidescrolling sequences at various intermissions throughout the journey, where players control Bowser in what could be considered a prelude of things to come. (Oh, and for those who seek him out, Mario isn't the only bro on an adventure – Luigi's got tales for days.)

While the franchise would come to lean on the paper theme as more than just an aesthetic choice in the years to come, TTYD also granted Mario a set of unique powers that aid him in his journey, from folding into a paper airplane to cross long gaps to . . . simply turning sideways so he can slip through cracks. It's kind of weird, but it works.

Truth be told, the words here don't begin to do justice to the experience of playing The Thousand-Year Door. Nearly 16 years after its release, it remains the peak of all things Paper Mario for millions of long-time fans. That's why they've been calling on Nintendo to make another entry like it for more than a decade! **– DAVID**

SUPER PAPER MARIO

APRIL 9, 2007

THE FIRST MARIO adventure to arrive on the Wii wasn't the gravity-bending Super Mario Galaxy, but this dimension-flipping RPG! Except . . . this isn't really an RPG. Sure, it borrows the look of the Paper Mario games, but it's presented as a sidescrolling platformer! Mario is more mobile than in his previous RPG outings, and enemies are battled with good old-fashioned stomps.

With Mario's new "Flip" mechanic, you can transform the world from 2D to 3D, avoiding traps and solving puzzles. The effect is only temporary (and it would be a stretch to call this a 3D platformer, given Mario's limited movement), but many of the game's best secrets and puzzles are hidden in 3D.

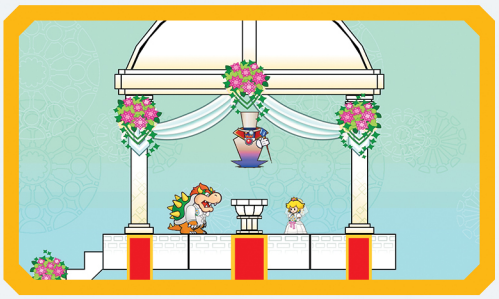
Super Paper Mario still remembers its RPG roots, though. You gain experience and level up, use items to boost your abilities and even accrue a party. During the journey you're joined by Peach, Bowser and Luigi, who each bring unique abilities – although only Mario can Flip into 3D. You'll also find Pixls, fairies who can be "equipped" to give you additional abilities for fighting and puzzle-solving.

Put it all together and Super Paper Mario feels less like an RPG or platformer, and more like an NES action/adventure, like Zelda II, Castlevania II or Faxanadu. And, just like those titles, you're either going to love this game or hate it!

The storyline and dialogue are very well written, as always. Interdimensional villain Count Bleck forces Peach and Bowser to marry, unleashing the Chaos Heart that threatens to swallow all worlds into a blank void. To stop it, Mario must gather the Pure Hearts, which involves playing a dating sim with a nerdy chameleon, shooting a robotic Luigi in space and fighting the three-headed Chomp who guards the gates of the Underwhere.

Sadly, the gameplay is often paper-thin. You're regularly given tedious busywork as a barrier to progress, such as running on a treadmill for 10 minutes or typing the same phrase into a keyboard over and over again. You can easily solve many puzzles by simply remembering which character has which ability, providing all the mental satisfaction of carrying around a big bunch of keys.

It's impossible to say if you'll like Super Paper Mario or not. There are just as many fans who will defend this as a masterpiece as there are critics who believe this is where the Paper Mario series first went wrong. **– MARK**



PLAYING IT TODAY

As the first Mario game released for the wildly popular Wii console, Super Paper Mario sold incredibly well, meaning there are millions of copies of its original disc available out there in the wild. What's more, the game received a second print run as a Nintendo Selects release in 2011, adding yet more volume to the stock in circulation. If you still can't find a copy for some reason, it's also still on sale digitally in the Wii U eShop as of this writing. But you'll need a Wii Remote, so make sure you have one handy!

NOVEMBER 11, 2012

PLAYING IT TODAY

While the sun has now fully set on the life cycle of the Nintendo 3DS, its era ended relatively recently as of this writing, and most of its big-name releases are still available for purchase in new condition from a variety of retailers. Even if you're a Sticker Star detractor, you may want to snag a copy now, while they're still easy to come by! This is one of those titles that's unlikely to ever be ported, remade or re-released ever again. For the sake of completion, stick it in your Paper Mario collection soon.

PAPER MARIO: STICKER STAR

PICTURE A NINTENDO game that refuses to hold your hand, allowing you to explore a large open world at your own pace, collect items from enemies in battle, then use those same items in more fights or to solve organically discovered puzzles in the environment. There's a story here too, but it's pretty minimal. For the most part, the narrative naturally develops through the decisions you make in your travels, instead of from cutscenes or other linear storytelling devices.

Sounds pretty great, right? People seemed to think so when The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild was released a few years back, but when Paper Mario: Sticker Star did many of the exact same things a few years earlier, many of those same folks flipped their lids with outrage! That's not to say these fans are hypocrites – it's more of a case of the devil being in the details. I'm sure that if Sticker Star had been as big and bold as Breath of the Wild, it would have done great, but in many ways, it was smaller than the games that preceded it. There's also the fact that fans had been clamoring for a big unstructured Zelda for years, while simultaneously champing at the bit for a more story-driven Paper Mario title. When loyal customers don't get what they ask for, they feel like the brands they support have crumpled them up and tossed them away, and that's exactly what a lot of Sticker Star's vocal detractors want to do with this lambasted entry in the series.

Thankfully, for me, Sticker Star made me feel totally catered to. As someone who plays RPGs more for the exploration and combat than the story, I really appreciated how it didn't weigh me down with a bunch of side characters. The writing was funny, the stickers were a hoot to hunt for and making most battles optional added an almost survival-horror element to the design. Strategizing the best way to run from unnecessary fights was almost as fun as the fights themselves!

More than anything, though, it was just fun to play a Mario adventure that let me run loose and wasn't afraid to stump me with head-scratching puzzles or tough-as-nails boss battles. And that soundtrack! It's one of the most lively in Mario history. Even if you hate the way Sticker Star plays, you've got to love how it sounds.

But again, unfortunately, my positive perspective isn't shared by the majority of vocal Paper Mario followers out there. To most players, Sticker Star's structure (or lack thereof) just represented the brand straying even further away from its roots. **– JONATHAN**

MARIO & LUIGI: PAPER JAM

BEFORE WE WRAP up this retrospective on all the past Paper Marios, we need to acknowledge that they've only represented one side of the legacy of Super Mario RPG. Running parallel with the Paper Mario brand and evolving its own ideas for how "Mario + role-playing" works best has been the Mario & Luigi series. This spot is a good place to insert it into this discussion, because this fifth installment in the series brought the two Mario RPG timelines together for a unified crossover event!

Despite all of the different Mario brands being able to trace their roots back to 1983's arcade hit Mario Bros., the "brothers" part of that first game's name has always taken a backseat. Luigi has sometimes been featured in the same games as his slightly older twin, and othertimes been ignored entirely. 2003's Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga changed all that by putting both brothers on equal footing in a tale that kept them together as a heroic duo from start to finish. Always having each other to play off of led to great comedic sequences and even a strong emotional core - you could see their love and support for one another play out again and again. They succeeded by succeeding together.

Having two constantly present heroes solved the partner problem that the Paper Mario games ran into, too, as battles in Superstar Saga and its sequels could always count on being at least twice as interesting. The party grew to four in the DS sequel Partners in Time, in which time travel allowed Baby Mario and Baby Luigi to quest alongside their older selves. Paper Jam, the game seen here, presented a scenario in which Mario and Paper Mario were confirmed to be two distinct characters, and the two of them formed a trio with Luigi for extra wacky antics. They all carried forward the same turn-based battle structure and emphasis on skillfully timed button presses to deal extra damage or resist incoming enemy attacks.

In fact, all the Mario & Luigi games were remarkably consistent in their gameplay design. They never veered off into wild, experimental territory like the Paper Mario brand has done (or if they did, it was only for minigame challenges before returning to business as usual for the main quest). Because of that, all the Mario & Luigi games are fairly consistently appreciated.

. . . And yet, this brand's dev team, AlphaDream, has now gone out of business. So maybe experimenting is best after all, even if fans grumble about it? **– LUCAS**

JANUARY 22, 2016

PLAYING IT TODAY

Since AlphaDream is no more, it's possible that Paper Jam could be the final Mario & Luigi tale ever told. (There were two other games released after this one, but both were remakes of earlier titles.) It's not the best of its brand, but adding Paper Jam to your video game collection gets you one step closer to having a complete set of both the Mario & Luigi series and all of Paper Mario's appearances, so it's a two-for-one! 3DS carts can still be found new as of now, or you could always download it.

OCTOBER 7, 2016

PLAYING IT TODAY

Plenty of Paper Mario fans had dismissed the idea that the Switch would see an all-new sequel in the series, since all of the high-profile Wii U ports the hybrid system has received in the last three years seemed to suggest that a Color Splash port might be on its way instead. But no! It looks like it's going to remain a Wii U exclusive, so now's the time to snag it via disc or download if you haven't already. It's worth playing for its gags alone – it's got a great sense of humor in its dialogue!

PAPER MARIO: COLOR SPLASH

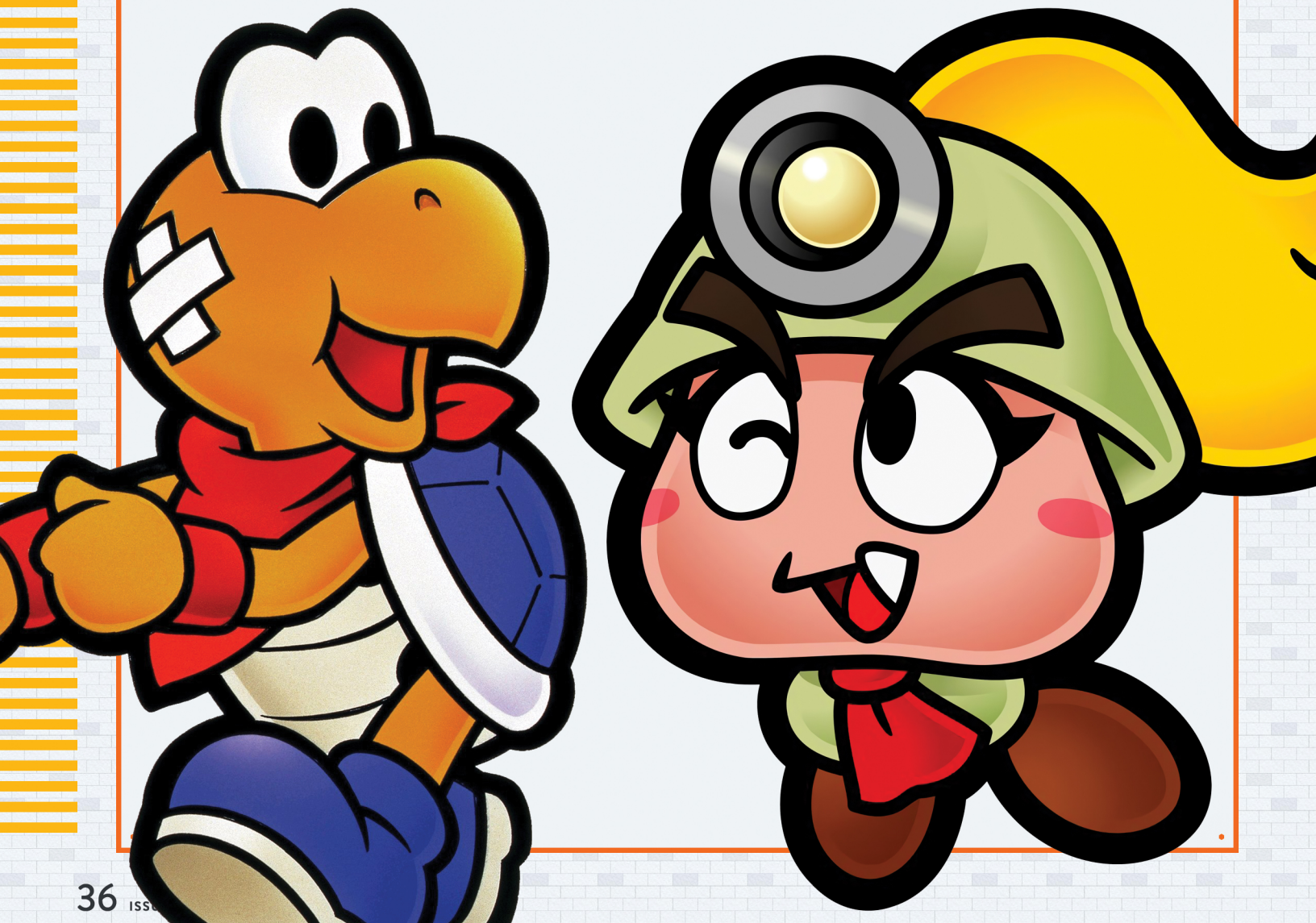
THE VIBRANT PRISM ISLAND is the setting for Paper Mario's fifth adventure, but when Peach and Mario arrive in its famously colorful Port Prisma, they notice it's drab and empty. This is where Mario discovers Huey, a 3D amnesic paint can who acts as the companion for the game. Aside from commentary and a few helpful moves, he doesn't do much, taking on the same kind of tag-along role that every companion after Thousand-Year Door has held. It turns out that Huey's the key to repainting everything the Shy Guys are sucking the paint off of, and naturally that's part of Bowser's plan – as well as covering himself in power-boosting paint to become stronger than ever! (But the paint also turns him more evil than usual, and he needs more of it to remain covered.) He also scattered the Big Paint Stars that power the fountain in Port Prisma, and has them guarded by the Koopalings, who each have an interesting and unique territory to terrorize.

The battle system consists of cards – but I wouldn't really call it a card battler game, because the enemies don't use them themselves. It's more how Mario's attacks are represented. Each combat scene involves filling up blank cards with paint (if necessary), and then performing the action on the cards. The series' typical timed attacks are still present to enhance the damage, and there's quite a bit of strategy involved in how to tackle each encounter. Meanwhile, most of the island's problems stem from discarded or abandoned 3D objects that, when rendered inert, can be converted into battle cards to use against enemies for massive damage – and often massive laughs!

Mario visits a tower, an archaeological dig site, a colosseum, a poisoned garden, a haunted house, a series of islands via ship, a trainyard, a desert, forests, a volcano, a temple, a circus and a power plant. Aside from a few of them, the locations are pretty novel and fun to explore. There are also Rock/Paper/Scissors tournaments in Roshambo Temples scattered throughout the map, where some strategy and detective work is involved (but you'll still need a lot of luck to succeed there toward the end). The best part of Color Splash is a scene in which Mario jumps back in time into Super Mario Bros. 3 to find hidden exits in its now-2.5D landscape. They even converted the battle music to sound like it came from the NES! The Color Splash soundtrack is my favorite among all the series' games, and all of them have very memorable tunes. **– BRETT**

PARTNER PARTY

In the minds of many fans, Paper Mario games can only be great if they have great partner characters. So let's shine the spotlight on our hero's past allies, to find out what made them so beloved! (Or reviled.)



THE ORIGINAL CREW

WHEN MARIO AND company dive into an unfamiliar genre, the result is expected to be wildly offbeat compared to more conventional titles in that space. That said, Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars wound up being a lot more traditional than the chapters that followed, striking an even balance between familiar JRPG trappings and the spirit of Mario's sidescrolling escapades.

The game's five-hero party demonstrated this balance beautifully. Leading the charge was of course our blue-collar mustache man, who eschewed staple RPG gear like swords and shields in favor of his trusty hammer, blazing fireballs and incomparable jumping prowess. Fresh off the bench was Princess Peach, whose healing abilities filed her squarely in the "white mage" camp. And then there was Bowser, whose turn as the team's indomitable tank marked the Koopa King's transformation from pure villain to lovable frenemy.

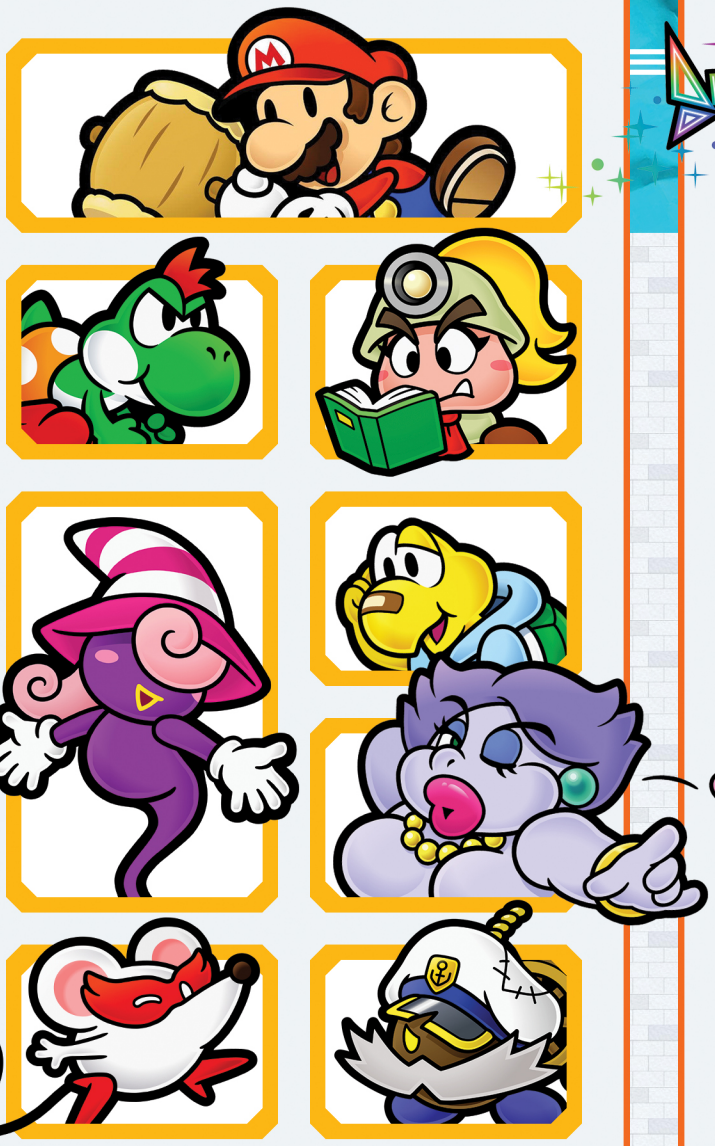
And who should round out this motley crew? Toad? Yoshi? *Green Mario?* None of the above! Instead, we were introduced to two new allies: Mallow, a living cloud raised as a tadpole whose emotions could alter the weather, and Geno, a star spirit in the body of a wooden doll who could fire devastating laser beams from his arm. Despite being wholly Square creations, they seamlessly integrated themselves into the Mario universe and became instant fan favorites.

This medley of old and new faces – each bringing a unique flavor to the table – is partly why Super Mario RPG remains *the* premier Mario RPG experience. If only later entries could have retained such a refreshing variety of character designs and capabilities! **– TONY**

REFORMED FOES

WITH ONLY A few exceptions prior to his leap into RPGs, Mario's monstrous foes had always been just that: enemies! Paper Mario decided to expand the roles of the familiar faces we'd stomped in the past by making Goombas, Koopas, Boos and the like into civilized creatures with their own towns and lore. As a result, all of your party members are "nice" versions of previous baddies: energetic Goombario (a Goomba), adventurous Kooper (a Koopa Troopa), reserved Bombette (a Bob-omb), clumsy postal worker Parakarry (a Paratroopa), haughty Lady Bow (a Boo), young Watt (a Li'l Sparky), nurturing Sushie (a Cheep Cheep) and the rebellious Lakilester (a Lakitu).

In battle, each member of this rogues' gallery has their own special approach to combat, and you'll want to switch them out regularly depending on the types of enemies you face. They also each have a special move in the field, such as Kooper's shell hitting faraway switches and Watt's luminescence lighting up dark rooms. This lets you reach new areas and secrets as your party grows larger, giving a similar sense of satisfaction to finding a new power-up in Metroid! **– MATTHEW T.**



THE DOOR KNOCKERS

ALONG MARIO'S ROGUEPORT journey, he's joined by many new yet familiar allies who have become favorites among fans. There's Goombella, a female Goomba and student in archaeology at the University of Goom, whose sassy wit and keen insight make her a great constant companion. Koops, a timid Koopa Troopa who joins Mario to avenge his father and prove he's not a coward. Madame Flurrie, a "Rubenesque" wind spirit and former actress whose performances will simply blow you away. A newly hatched Yoshi (whom you can name) is a scrappy little guy who can carry Mario quickly across land or even through the air! Treated poorly by her sisters before joining up with Mario, Vivian is a Shadow Siren who uses her ability to melt into the shadows. A Bob-omb named Admiral Bobbery was a legendary sea captain, but fell into a deep depression before Mario helped renew his passion for sailing. Finally, Ms. Mowz is a Little Mouser thief with a nose for rare badges. This lot helps prove you can still have a variety of interesting characters even among the established creatures we're already so familiar with, and also distinct from the previous game's team! **– DAVID**

THE PIXL POSSE

SUPER PAPER MARIO is no standard RPG, and so its party system breaks the rules. Mario's first partner is Tippi the Pixl. She's always by his side, no matter who else is in the party. She plays an important role in the story, reveals hidden objects as the Wii Remote pointer . . . and is the only character written without a sense of humor.

Then there are the main characters who, once they've joined you, can be swapped with Mario so you can use their special powers. Bowser breathes fire and deals extra damage. Peach floats over gaps. And Luigi has a super-high spring jump!

Most of the party is comprised by other Pixls, though. Each grants the active main character a special ability, effectively making them equipment with personalities. Thoreau lets you grab and throw things. Boomer blows up. Slim lets you slip through narrow gaps. Thudley gives you a ground pound. Carrie lets you ride over spikes and moves fast. Fleep reveals secrets. Cudge gives you a hammer attack. And that's not even all of them! They might have gone overboard . . . and then overcorrected for that in the next game! **– MARK**

A CREW OF TWO

A STICKER FAIRY named Kersti was Mario's sole companion in Sticker Star, making for a fairly large level of fairy-downsizing from Super Paper Mario's total of 12 fairy friends. This sparkly, silver pal was Mario's equivalent to the golden crown sticker that powers up Bowser at the start of the game, right before he kidnapped Peach (again). Kersti lies at the center of the story that unfolds from there, which is appropriately paper-thin. Compared to the 64 special "thing" attacks introduced in the same game (like the giant three-dimensional fan that literally blows enemies away), Kersti didn't do much to stick in my memory. **– JONATHAN**

WORLDS COLLIDE

IN ANSWER TO your question, Brett, yes you can. Haven't you ever heard that "two's a party, but three's a crowd"? (That's the phrase, right?) Things were exactly that much more crowded in Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam, which set itself apart from Sticker Star and Color Splash by having three core party members instead of just two. It doesn't seem like a lot, but the 50% total increase seems better in this context, I suppose! Excellent scenario set-up from the AlphaDream team and great writing from the localization squad helped make a tag-team trio that included two different Marios make sense. Too bad Paper Luigi didn't tag along too! **– LUCAS**

DUO #2 . . . OH

CAN YOU EVEN call two people a party? Mario meets Huey shortly after arriving in Color Splash's colorless Port Prisma, and the three-dimensional paint can helps him restore the port and Prism Island (after transforming himself into 2D to tag along). Huey acts more like a guide than a party member, only helping Mario paint battle cards and tackle the occasional puzzle. He also generally lacks character development or personality, but he's in a Mario game, so he's cheerful. Mostly he's there to progress the story with his paint powers, like absorbing the black paint or sniffing out the Big Paint Stars Mario needs to recover. **– BRETT**

Well, it certainly does seem like there's a statistically significant correlation between an enduring favorable fan reputation and a diverse cast of tag-along partner characters when it comes to the Paper Mario series. Maybe the more is the merrier after all! The more characters there are in any given game, the more chances players have to connect with one they'll really love . . . whereas if there's only one ever-present ally, the whole game might fall flat if their personality doesn't make a lasting impact. How will the new Paper Mario: The Origami King address this clearly crucial issue? Read on and find out!

PAPER MARIO: THE ORIGAMI KING

The battle between traditional and experimental Paper Mario is on.

FOOL ME ONCE, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me! Fool me three times? *Four!?* Well, shame on an entire fandom, perhaps, but I think Paper Mario fans at this point are just tired of feeling like fools.

We've just run through a retrospective of every Paper Mario installment up to this point, but let's distill that down to a few paragraphs here. Super Mario RPG laid the foundation for what playing as Mario would feel like in the context of a role-playing game, establishing key gameplay mechanics liked timed hits in battle and making sure that the exploration sequences between battle scenes felt sufficiently Mario-ish by retaining a focus on platforming. The first official Paper Mario then took those two elements and added the all-new paper-themed art style that would define the series thereafter. It also refined the combat to put the spotlight squarely on Mario himself, pairing him with a squad of partner characters who'd assist him in fights one at a time. When Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door replicated that same style of combat, it was canonized in the minds of nearly every early series fan as "the way Paper Mario ought to be."

Then, in the next game, they changed it.

Plenty of Nintendo's brands had presented experimental game designs in the past, so when Super Paper Mario arrived on the Wii and did a lot of things totally differently than its two predecessors, no one raised the alarm immediately. It seemed like the fans took it to be a one-time goofy offshoot of the "real" Paper Mario series, and that things would go back to "normal" with whatever the next installment would be. And, honestly, that assumption wasn't a misguided one – plenty of Nintendo's ongoing series did weird, gimmicky things just to take advantage of the uniqueness of the Wii hardware in particular.

But while other series did return to their relative home bases after the era of motion control came to an end, Paper Mario never did. Super Paper Mario's rejection of turn-based battles in favor of sidescrolling hopping and bopping led next to Sticker Star's reliance on consumable stickers to fuel its combat, which then led after that to Color Splash's card-battling system that was also based entirely around gathering up attacks that you could run out of. The partner characters fell away when the new battle system ideas no longer needed them to be present, and somehow 16 years have now gone by since the last time fans have been sold a game with the "Paper Mario" name that truly feels like it belongs in this brand.

And that's where we find ourselves now, on the verge of the launch of Nintendo's next attempt.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS RELEASE: JULY 17, 2020 RATING: E

Not wanting to fool ourselves into thinking The Origami King would be a true return to form, long-time Paper Mario players approached its reveal with caution. We've been burned before! We know better than to let ourselves get too hyped too early, because then we'll just end up kicking ourselves when the final product turns out not to be what we imagined.

. . . However. *Cautiously*, I'm here to report that Paper Mario: The Origami King does indeed look like it's taking some steps back toward some design ideas that were so beloved in the first and second games in the series. It's not a total break away from the trajectory that the experimental sequels put the series on throughout the past 13 years, but traditional values do seem to be creeping back into the mix.

Let's assess things one topic at a time.

A WORLD MADE OF PAPER

While certainly not the primary complaint leveled against recent series entries, the push further and further into emphasizing the paper-ness of everything in Paper Mario's world has been an element that several vocal fans have decried. I personally haven't minded it much. I praised the diorama look of Color Splash in particular, and I liked that it carried on the efforts of games like Kirby's Epic Yarn and Yoshi's Woolly World to put an extra bit of creativity into something as basic as what walls, floors and stairs look like.

Still, Paper Mario was not originally intended to draw your attention to the fact that these characters and the world they inhabit are literally made out of stuff from an elementary school teacher's supply drawer. We mentioned this a few pages ago, but the first name for Paper Mario was "Mario Story" — the paper look was made to reinforce the feeling that you were playing along and controlling a Mario tale that would have felt at home in a children's book. The first game gave buildings in the environment a pop-up book effect to further drive this home. Paper Mario was a story being told from a book first and foremost — the characters and what happens to them were the point, not the pages they were "printed" on.

Paper Mario: The Origami King, in this regard, takes one step forward and one step back. If you thought that Color Splash leaned into the paper aesthetic too much, you'll be happy to see that the environments in this new sequel dial that back. They're not screaming "Hey, this is all made of paper, you know!" all the time. On the other hand, the villains being an army of origami soldiers is the most paper-emphasizing thing the series has ever featured. So there's that.

A TWISTED TALE

Let's go ahead and talk about those villains next, since we're on the topic! The subtitle "The Origami King" refers directly to the new big bad of this adventure: King Olly, seen just above and to the left. He's a floating, folded, fearsome piece of paper who is also apparently a master of disguise, able to fold and refold his paper body at will to masquerade as any person or creature he chooses. He's got some beef with how things are run in the Mushroom Kingdom, and so he leads an invading force of Folded Soldiers (origami versions of classic Mario series foes like Goombas, Shy Guys and Koopa Troopas) into Princess Peach's domain to terrorize the non-folded paper people who live there.

It gets worse. Paper Peach, who has consistently been an ally to Paper Mario throughout this series and often a secondary playable hero, has turned to the dark side! Whether by coercion or by choice, she's folded herself into the creepy (but still totally cute) Origami Peach, and as this new quest begins, she offers Mario the option to join her in this cult as well. Our hero refuses, of course, and after being blown away from Peach's Castle, his adventure to restore order in the Kingdom begins to unfold.

On the balance of experimental vs. traditional, this story setup has to land on the experimental side of things. If this were a true old-school Paper Mario sequel, then we'd probably have the good-old goody-two-shoes Peach kidnapped and whisked away to the villain's dungeon somewhere, awaiting rescue. For that expectation to be subverted immediately by seemingly casting the princess as the secondary antagonist right from the start is bold and new. I love it! It's not traditional at all, but I still think it's a great call.

PARTNERS PLAY A PART

I don't seem to be selling my thesis statement of "The Origami King is actually bringing back traditional elements" so far — so let's jump to the big reason why I'd make that claim: Partners are back!

Now, temper your expectations, because they're not *all* the way back. It doesn't appear that Mario will get to build up a whole team of reformed former foes as in the first Paper Mario and The Thousand-Year Door. But an earnest step back in that direction is being taken here, since it's been revealed that Mario will be joined in exploration, story sequences and even some battles by unique, named individual characters set apart from the masses of their specific species.

Take the Bob-omb below. His look isn't as fanciful as Bombette or Admiral Bobbery — in fact, the only distinctive visual difference he can claim versus other Bob-ombs seems to be that his fuse is missing from the top of his body. That's not all that's missing, though! He's also lost his memory, and you'll have to help him overcome his amnesia so he can remember his real name: Bobby!

Next, take a look at the worried, helmeted, shovel-equipped Toad in the other screenshot below. That's the new character Professor Toad, and Mario will buddy up with him on an archaeological expedition to uncover the secrets of an ancient Toad temple!

Again, these new allies may not fully recapture the magic of Ms. Mowz or Lady Bow or Lakilester. But it is encouraging to see the developers at Intelligent Systems seem to acknowledge the feedback that came in for the last few games and work to steer the ship back in the direction of true, unique tag-along partners. We might not get all the way back to where we want the series to be in this area in this game, but let's take a small victory when we can get it!

BAMBOOZLING BATTLES

Now, back over to the purely experimental side of things for a look at the most bizarre battle system this series has ever seen. Say hello to The Donut! Or maybe The Dartboard? We're going to need some kind of mildly derogatory name established for Origami King's ring-shaped battle arena, because I'm sure people will be wanting to complain about it for years to come.

A HERO WITH REAL DEPTH

PAPER MARIO

He's back in action once again: everyone's favorite two-dimensional man of mustached machismo, Paper Mario! We've met Metal Mario and Dr. Mario, Baby Mario and Cat Mario, Gold Mario and even Skeletal Mario over the years, but all those alter egos are all just the same guy wearing different suits or drawn from different time periods. Paper Mario, though? He's canonically his own separate, unique character as of a few years ago, and the fact that his fanbase seems to be wholly separate from the other Mario series' faithful followers just reinforces that reality. What does being his own man mean? Well, that he's got a lot of lofty expectations to meet that are laid at his foldable feet. Because of how the discourse surrounding this series has developed, it'll be fascinating to see how this new adventure impacts his overall reputation!

When it comes to attacking Mario's foes, the battles have a lot in common with past games: He can choose to strike with either a hammer or with stomping leaps, and you'll be able to find and equip powered-up versions of both of those types of attacks once again, like the Hurlhammer that turns our hero's close-range melee strike into a ranged assault instead. The new twist — which is literally a twist — is the fact that before you choose your attack, you have to spin and slide segments of the circle-shaped battlefield around to gather your enemies together into groups or lines. And you'll have only a few seconds to do it!

Battles, then, are two-fold in The Origami King: First, quickly assessing how you can most efficiently align a scattered set of foes, and second, picking the best option of attack to do the most damage to the most targets once you're done shifting them all around. I like the ingenuity at work in designing such a wild new take on Paper Mario battle scenes, but I'm once again approaching this new news with caution, because my first instinct is to be skeptical about whether or not a system like this will be able to remain interesting for the duration of an entire RPG adventure. Will we just get tired of all the twisting?

THE NEWEST FLOATING FAIRY-ALIKE

OLIVIA

While it's true that a few at least somewhat traditional partners are being reintroduced into the Paper Mario mix in The Origami King, allies like Bobby the Bob-omb and Professor Toad will have to play third fiddle behind Olivia, this sequel's new second-stringer. She's stepping into the same role previously occupied by Tippi, Kersti and Huey, respectively, in that she's an ever-present floating friend who will serve as the source of a lot of the game's story-advancing dialogue, allowing Paper Mario to continue to be a mostly silent protagonist. (Can you believe this same dynamic is still in use 22 years after Navi first admonished us in Ocarina of Time? "Hey! Listen!") Olivia is the sister of the Origami King himself, King Olly, and she's surely going to show off some of her own special self-folding skills before this new adventure is all said and done.

THE PROBLEM OF PROGRESS

For many fans, one of the most important parts of Paper Mario battles is what happens once one of them is over: Does Mario gain experience points? That core tenet of role-playing games is such a simple thing, but so valued by so many. EXP in an RPG is A-OK, IMHO, but I wouldn't be heart-broken if it isn't included here.

Which is lucky, because it doesn't appear to be. Mario wins coins after successfully sending packs of baddies packing, and coins can be used to make various purchases, including adding more time to the clock to be able to twist the battle arena with a little more leisure, if you like. But experience points don't seem to be in the mix. That'll be a knock against this game for traditionalists.

Counterbalancing that missing bit of game design a bit, though, is the return of another old bit: badges! (Called accessories here, though.) These equippable little emblems each boost some aspect of Mario's abilities, like giving him extra HP. Using coins to buy these boosting items — as well as extra weapons — will kinda sorta be a substitute for experience points. It's giving you control over how Mario grows as a hero instead of leaving it up to a growing level number.

OVERWORLD INTERACTIONS

Mario's RPGs have always made travel from Point A to Point B interesting in some way or another, usually by packing each explorable environment with puzzles to solve, hidden items to find and other things to have fun doing beyond just keeping your eyes peeled for the next enemy attack. Color Splash was satisfying in this regard, I thought, since its areas were filled with "blank" spots that Mario had to color back into vibrant life with the power of his paint-slinging hammer. The Origami King seems to be taking that same idea and tweaking it a bit: This time around, the spaces Mario explores are filled with holes in the ground, and our hero must gather up a sackful of confetti to use to fill those gaps. Successfully restoring the structural integrity of pathways will no doubt lead you to puzzles to solve, hidden items to find and other things to have fun doing.

What's more, another new kind of overworld interaction will present itself in the form of Mario's "1,000-Fold Arms" ability. Like a fighter from the world of ARMS, Paper Mario can now extend his limbs well beyond his normal limits of reach to be able to grab distant objects and parts of the paper world. This is more Sticker Star and Color Splash DNA carrying over once again, as both of those games had similar "manipulate your surroundings" sequences.

LUIGI'S BACK!

Sheesh, we're coming to the end here and I seem to have made more of a case for Origami King being another experimental sequel rather than a source of hope for traditionalists. But here's one more bone to throw to the old-school fans! Luigi is back, and just like in The Thousand-Year Door, he's going to be embarking on his own journey that parallels Mario's while our primary protagonist is out saving the day. Apparently Mario's quest will be to cut five massive streamers that have stretched out from Peach's Castle — while Luigi will be looking for the keys to open its locked front door!

It's not much, but it's something. And that may be where thrice-fooled old-schoolers have to land with this one: It's clearly not going to be the real "Paper Mario 3" so many want to see happen, but it is going to have a whole lot to love all the same. I hope you'll all give it a chance! **— LUCAS**

NICKELODEON KART RACERS 2: GRAND PRIX

A slime-slingin' sequel!

BACK IN 2018, GameMill released Bamtang Games' Nickelodeon Kart Racers for the Nintendo Switch, a perfectly competent but uninspired kart racer that utilized a handful of beloved properties from The First Network for Kids . . . while not really capitalizing on anything that made them beloved in the first place. So, maybe the second time will be the charm?

Details are a little sparse at the moment, but if you were dissatisfied with what the original brought to the table, there may yet be some hope. While there are only four more courses than the original (28 versus 24), the roster has been increased considerably, from a dozen characters taken from four different Nicktoons to a whopping 30 racers from shows across the network's history. Not only is there some new blood for the franchises seen before (Shredder from TMNT '12, for instance — wait, they're still not using Rise of the TMNT?), but several new properties as well, including CatDog, The Loud House, Danny Phantom, Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Legend of Korra, Ren & Stimpy, Invader Zim and Rocko's Modern Life. Oh, and JoJo Siwa is there for good measure, too.

In addition to more than double the racers, you can now assemble your very own pit crew from some 70 different crew members to "Increase your attack, defense and fun!" (Note: We're not sure if "fun" is a quantifiable stat in this game.) You can also use parts that are said to be inspired by the shows to improve your ride.

Let's be cautiously optimistic: This sequel just might capture more of the Nick spirit. **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAMEMILL DEVELOPER: BAMTANG GAMES RELEASE: OCTOBER 6, 2020 RATING: E

TRANSFORMERS: BATTLEGROUNDS

Autobots, transform and find some cover!

LITTLE IS KNOWN yet about the just-announced Transformers: Battlegrounds from indie developer Coatsink and publisher Outright Games. The main thing put up front is that it's a "tactical warfare adventure game," which seems to imply that it might be a strategy-based game of some sort.

Megatron is closing in on the Allspark, the ancient artifact that makes the Transformers more than just mere machines, but super robotic lifeforms. Bumblebee and the Autobots are in need of a new commander to help save the Earth, and that's you. Apparently Optimus Prime just isn't getting the job done anymore!

If the burden of leadership feels too great for your shoulders alone, you can also recruit a friend for some co-op multiplayer action. (Maybe Optimus will give each of you a half of the Matrix — wouldn't be the first time.)

The other big takeaway is the visual style, which should be more than familiar to fans of the recently ended Transformers: Cyberverse cartoon. With that said, there's no explicit connection to that branch of the franchise, which itself used many of the "evergreen" designs Hasbro has created for numerous characters. These were created to be used beyond any specific iteration of the franchise (meaning they can be kept on store shelves without having to be refreshed constantly), and have appeared in other places, such as IDW's comics.

So even if you're not a fan of the latest TV iteration of the robots in disguise, grieve not! We'll hopefully get new info before the game's planned October release, and we'll find out then if there's more to it than meets the eye. **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: HASBRO, BANDAI NAMCO & OUTRIGHT GAMES DEVELOPER: COATSINK RELEASE: OCTOBER 23, 2020 RATING: RP

FINAL FANTASY CRYSTAL CHRONICLES: REMASTERED EDITION

Fighting fog with faraway friends!

ONCE UPON A time – back in the GameCube era – Nintendo's game developers decided to go all-in on "connectivity." Not satisfied with working only with the display area afforded to them from TVs, they wanted to present players with gameplay experiences that took place across multiple screens. A new Game Boy Advance link cable was introduced, and thereafter dozens of titles took advantage of the ability to link together GameCube software with the extra display available on the GBA. Many compatible games used the connectivity between the two machines only sparingly, but a few standout hits like Pac-Man Vs., The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Adventures and Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles focused everything on that connection.

The problem? Price. Buying a new game for your GameCube was costly enough, but to get the complete experience of Four Swords Adventures and Crystal Chronicles in particular, you needed to also have four separate Game Boy Advance units, four of the GBA link cables and enough batteries to keep everything functioning for hours on end. If you somehow managed to pull everything together and sat down with three friends in the same room to play these games, you almost certainly were rewarded with some of the best gaming memories you've ever made. But I have to think that perfect aligning of the planets was a pretty rare event. (I myself only managed to make it happen a few times, and only because I was in college at the time and could scrounge all the needed friends and components from my roommates and neighbors.)

What does that all have to do with today? Well, after almost two decades, one of those great connectivity experiments is finally making an encore appearance. Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Remastered Edition will revive the multiplayer greatness of yesteryear, but in a modern way that will cost a whole lot less to get into.

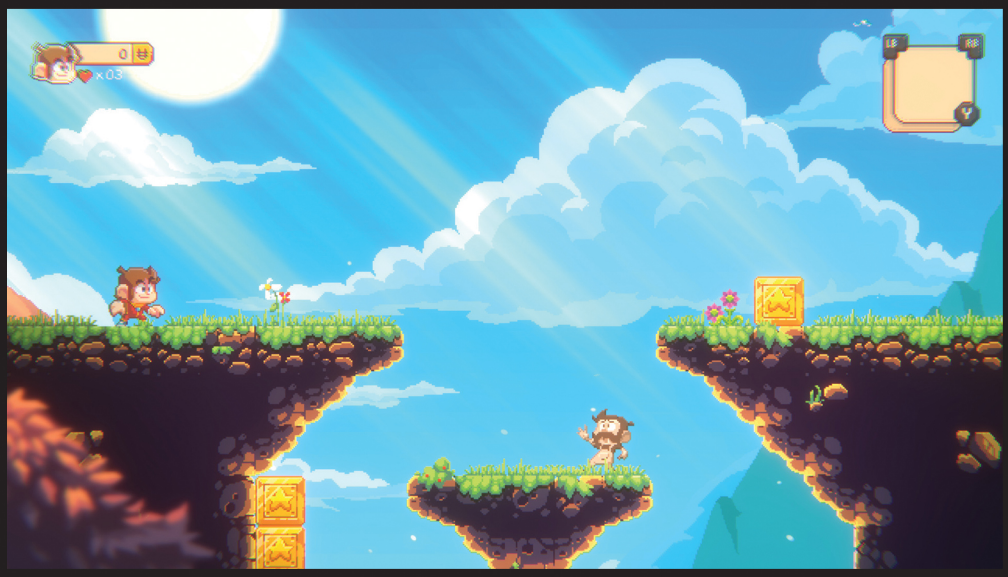
The GBAs are gone! The link cables have been left in the past. A "normal" online multiplayer interface replaces them, and while some of the magic of playing in the same living room with your pals will be gone when you play this way, as we're still in the era of social distancing, you probably don't need to be inviting buddies over to sit on the same couch with you anyhow.

Now, what is Crystal Chronicles? It's a multiplayer-focused adventure in which you and up to three allies work together to save a fantasy world that's filled with fog. The planet on which it takes place is shrouded in a constant cloud of "Miasma," a poisonous gas that keeps people huddled together in small communities built inside the scant few pockets of safe, breathable air that still exist. Your job is to make sure your hometown stays safe by venturing out into the murk to bring home drops of the magical "Myrrh" that keeps the fog at bay. To keep you safe while you're on your quest, you carry a chalice of the Myrrh with you everywhere you go, making a portable pocket of safety surround you every step of the way.

Teamwork is critical, as it's often up to one player to bear the bucket while the other three keep him or her safe. You get to customize your playable character, choosing from four different races, each with their own weaknesses and strengths – will you be able to build a balanced team? Will you be able to rely on your friends to cooperate, or will they leave you choking on poison gas as they dash off to snag a treasure before you can get to it? (It'll probably be a bit of both.)

With the old GBA and link cable requirements gone, I'm excited to see if this Cube classic can connect with an all-new audience! **– LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: AUGUST 27, 2020 RATING: T



ALEX KIDD IN MIRACLE WORLD DX

At long last, Alex is back in action!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: MERGE GAMES DEVELOPERS: MERGE GAMES & JANKENTEAM RELEASE: TBA 2021 RATING: RP

SOME RECENT SEGA franchise resurrections have been surprising, but not *too* surprising. Streets of Rage? Legendary. Had to happen eventually. Panzer Dragoon? A classic. Shenmue? The fans couldn't be ignored. Wonder Boy? It was no wonder.

. . . But Alex Kidd? Even for dyed-in-the-wool fans of the little prince from Mt. Eternal, purveyors of punching and Peticopter-racing alike, it seemed like a longer shot than most.

For those unfamiliar: Before Sonic the Hedgehog (but after Opa-Opa), there was Alex Kidd. As Sega and Nintendo simultaneously broke into the Japanese console market, Nintendo changed the world with Super Mario Bros., and Sega needed an answer to match their rivals. They needed . . . kid Goku from Dragon Ball.

However, just as with Popeye and Nintendo before it, the licensing deal fell through, and so Alex Kidd was born — a game that would grab the same sort of eyes that were affixed to Mario, but different. So different that the original release even had swapped buttons when set next to its rival, all in an effort to stand apart!

As Sega's mascot hopeful in the late '80s, Alex Kidd was featured in several games, not all of which were designed with him in mind. Once Sonic hit the scene, however, he wound up working in a retail store (according to the Japanese Dreamcast exclusive Segagaga) before being called back into action as a part of the Sega All-Stars roster and Archie's "Worlds Unite" crossover event comic.

And yet, after 20 years, here we are.

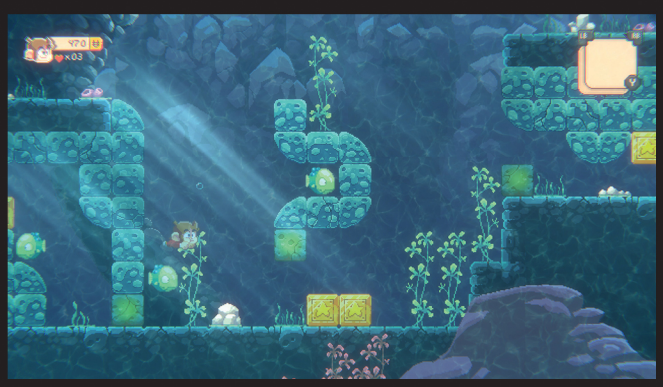
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX began as a fan game from Spanish developers a few years ago, but with publisher Merge Games backing the group now known as Jankenteam, it's achieved official status. The most immediately noticeable difference from the original is the graphics, which use a more modern pixel art style, providing many more colors and frames of animation. However, much as in Lizardcube's remake of Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap, you'll be able to bring back the Sega Master System version's visuals in all their glory at the mere press of a button.

There's more than a visual overhaul going on here, though. In addition to remastered and reimagined music tracks, AKiMWDX promises gameplay refinements such as new, tighter and more fluid controls, as well as improved alternative boss fights with more intuitive mechanics — perhaps even taking the scissors to the Janken paper, which many agree would rock.

In addition to the normal mode, there will be other modes to enjoy as well. Classic Mode promises all of the same boss fights, dialogue, levels and functions you either love or hate and may remember from the Sega Ages release last year. And who doesn't enjoy a good Boss Rush Mode? But do we dare hope for the inclusion of a multiplayer Janken (a.k.a. Rock/Paper/Scissors) mode?

If all of that wasn't enough to convince you that this isn't just a block-for-block recreation of the original game, though, Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX also seeks to expand the lore of the original game by adding new levels, featuring new enemy types and even new vehicles. The story itself wasn't conveyed very well in the original, and Jankenteam seems keen to resolve that, as we've caught a glimpse of what appear to be new plot-progressing NPCs.

It's too soon to say for sure, but this could be just the second chance Alex Kidd needed. It might even lead to further remakes too! **— DAVID**



LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

Over four decades of adventures in one new package!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: WARNER BROS. I.E.
DEVELOPER: TT GAMES
RELEASE: OCTOBER 20, 2020 RATING: E10+

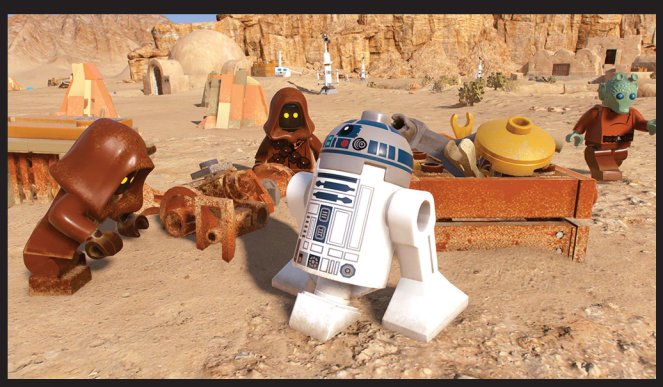
LEGO STAR WARS has been on a bit of a break for the last four years, as after the launch of LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens in 2016, the brand has skipped over the opportunities to adapt the subsequent films.

Until now! It turns out TT Games was just biding their time, ignoring the idea of producing standalone adventures based on The Last Jedi and The Rise of Skywalker in favor of saving that material for this release, a full 43-year celebration of the whole trilogy of trilogies stretching all the way back to 1977's first journey to that galaxy far, far away.

Now, granted, all of the older films have already had LEGO game adaptations in the past. The whole modern era of "LEGO + film license" games began 15 years ago with the first LEGO Star Wars, which focused on the prequel trilogy: The Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones and Revenge of the Sith. Its success inspired a sequel, LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy, which gave A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi the same blocky, plastic treatment. Now, over a decade later, it'll be interesting to see how the TT Games developers of this era work with that same old material. Will the portions of this new LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga that are once again based on the classic movies feel like a retread, or will they be able to break free from the shadow of their forebears' previous work?

Another question to consider: Which scenes will be prioritized over others? Each of the nine films is going to get five playable stages, making for a total of 45 different action experiences. Each of these movies has much more than five unique setpieces, so it will surely be a tough decision to pick which get to step into the spotlight, and which are left behind!

With so much material to work with and the echo of the older LEGO Star Wars titles still reverberating through many fans' minds, it may be a difficult task to please everyone with the finished product . . . ah, who am I kidding? Star Wars fans are famously forgiving and universally adore every piece of media produced for them, so I'm sure it'll be fine! **— LUCAS**



SEA OF STARS

Paper Mario, Chrono Trigger and Golden Sun combine to inspire an all-new adventure.

HAVING NOW ARRIVED in the year 2020, we've flipped the calendar into a fifth new decade of video games being an integral component of entertainment in our homes. (Sixth if you want to be generous and reach all the way back to the '70s.) The ongoing aging of our favorite fun-making industry is great on one hand, because game developers are gaining more and more skill over the years, and the average quality of releases has skyrocketed compared to what players once had to deal with. (Again, why I wouldn't count the output of the '70s in the official lineage.) But as more and more years go by, there's a compounding problem as well: More and more incredible hits from the past are being left behind, without modern ways to play them – or at least without new sequels to carry forward what they first started.

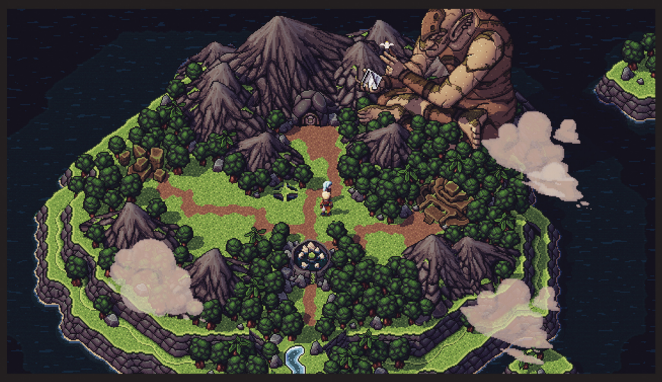
SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SABOTAGE STUDIO RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP

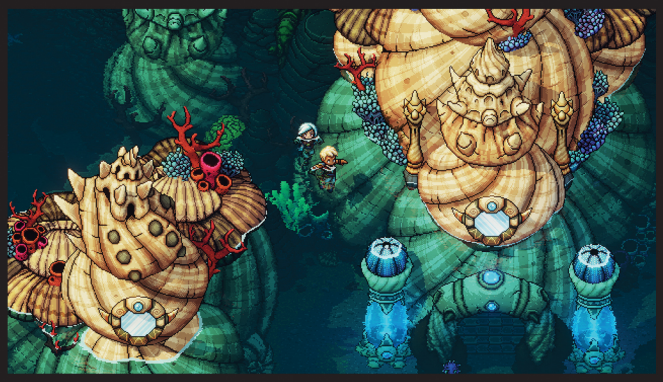
The Paper Mario series is in this unfortunate position, as we're also exploring elsewhere in this same issue – it's getting new sequels, yes, but not in the same traditional RPG style of its first games, which is what many fans really want. Another major series that's been largely left in the past is Square Enix's Chrono brand – Chrono Trigger, often upheld as the standout masterpiece of the 16-bit era, is turning 25 years old in America on August 11 this year, just a few weeks after this issue goes out the door. And yet in the quarter-century since its release, it's only received a handful of re-releases and just one real sequel (which is turning 20 years old itself on August 15). And then there's Camelot's beloved Golden Sun series, which has been active a *little* more recently – but its last game, Dark Dawn, will turn 10 later this year. So it's almost hit a full decade of inaction as well.

Those three series are in a sorry state. Thankfully, there's Sea of Stars!

Now in development at Sabotage Studio (the makers of The Messenger), Sea of Stars is laying claim to components from all three of those famous franchises and fusing them together with brand-new, modern ideas and an incredible visual presentation to make something entirely fresh and special for fans of any and all of them.

Chrono Trigger is the most obvious influence, as you can tell at a glance that Sea of Stars' visual style has been built on its same foundation. The top-down view is placed at the same angle as that old epic; the characters are similarly proportioned and animated. The Chrono Trigger influence also extends into Sea of Stars' battles as well, in that there's no cutaway to a separate screen when combat begins – you face off with foes right in the same spot where you encounter them. Having a maximum fighting force of three heroes, as well as combo moves to access, also come from Chrono.





The Paper Mario component comes in next — or I suppose it would be more accurate to credit Super Mario RPG, since we've already established it as the Paper Mario precursor. Sea of Stars borrows the mechanic of timed hits from that saga. After selecting your chosen action from the battle menu, you don't simply sit back to watch a canned animation play out — you have to actively press a button to deal extra damage when attacking, or to deflect incoming damage when on defense.

Finally, credit has to be given to Golden Sun for the Sabotage Studio team's approach to creating an interactive overworld. Having cut their teeth on the action and platforming of The Messenger, these developers didn't want their follow-up to be a simple stuck-to-a-grid RPG in which your movements were limited by arbitrary boundaries in the environment. So they looked to games like Golden Sun, which involved a lot of environmental puzzles using Psynergy moves to alter the shape of the landscape around its heroes, and took that idea to the next level here.

All three of those borrowed components are evolved, in fact. Chrono Trigger's three-character combat is upgraded with a swap-in system, as any other playable characters waiting in reserve can be tagged into an active battle if their abilities would be better suited to felling the foes at hand. The Paper Mario timed hits mechanic is twisted by the need to pay attention to multiple enemies' spellcasting animations and target them quickly, in the right order and with the right kind of counterattack in order to interrupt their magic-in-progress. And then another wrinkle in battle is introduced in the form of Eclipse Orbs — they're floating balls of energy our heroes can absorb to power up their attacks.

Our heroes? I'm glad you asked! The two stars of Sea of Stars are Zale and Valere, otherwise known as the Sunboy and the Moongirl. Zale was born on the Summer Solstice and wields a sunblade; Valere came into the world under the moon of the Winter Solstice and can cast lunar magic with her trusty moonstaff. Together, the two are known as the Solstice Warriors, and only they can save the world!

Now, here's where things get really interesting. Sea of Stars has major connections to great games of the past, as I've already explained, but its most exciting elements are all its own — including a bold dynamic lighting system. Zale and Valere can control the movements of the sun and the moon, and thus can alter the light in the world around them at will. It could be midnight and they send the sun into the sky to make light blaze like high noon. They could need to operate under cover of darkness in the middle of the day — and they can do that too, sending the sun to sleep while the moon takes its place past the clouds. (The people living in this world must be horribly confused all the time!)

As a gameplay mechanic, changing the lighting outside at will is full of potential. But just the visual effect of seeing the change take place — with shadows stretching out, fading away and then popping back into existence again from the opposite angle, all within a few seconds' time — is truly wild. Sabotage Studio has staffed up since they made The Messenger, and a couple of their new recruits coming in from major AAA studios have been able to work some kind of technical wizardry to make it all possible.

And this is just the beginning! Sea of Stars is, unfortunately, a long way away from release — it's not planned to be completed until 2022. I'm discouraged that that means I'll be over 40 when I finally get to play the finished product (ack!), but it is encouraging to think about how much greater that finished product will be after that much more development time.

Sea of Stars' development has been funded by a Kickstarter campaign that wrapped up this past April, bringing in over $1,200,000. Perhaps even more amazing than hitting that lofty financial total was the fact that Sabotage Studio managed to attract the attention of Yasunori Mitsuda, one of the legendary composers of Chrono Trigger's sensational soundtrack . . . and he's joining Sea of Stars to make new music! Paper Mario might be going in odd directions and Golden Sun might still be dark, but hey, this one's truly shaping up to be Chrono's spiritual successor! **— LUCAS**

NEW POKÉMON SNAP

Finally! After two decades of waiting, it's finally happening!

HOPE NEVER DIED.

On June 17, most fans believed the most notable Pokémon news of the day would be Part 1 of the Sword & Shield DLC going live. Instead, the end of the seven-month wait for the Isle of Armor to open its shores was washed away by an announcement over 20 years in the making! Pokémon Snap 2 is happening!!!

Officially named New Pokémon Snap, it's a Switch-bound sequel to what is now finally a series after more than two decades of existence as a simple one-off spin-off on the N64. It cannot be overstated how massive of a reveal this is: Adult Pokémon fans all around the globe gasped in unison as the reality of what we were witnessing made itself clear in our minds. I'll admit it: I got teary-eyed.

The wait for this specific sequel to be revealed has just been *so long.* Pokémon Snap has been an inactive brand since *the 1900s.* Literally there have been babies born who have lived through their entire childhoods, and their teenage years, and who have become legally recognized adults all in the span of time we've been waiting. Some of those babies are married and have babies of their own. An entire generation of humanity has come and gone.

What's worse? Throughout these past 21 years, there have been so many moments when it seemed like the timing was just perfect for a Snap sequel to appear. A GameCube follow-up would have made sense just to improve on the original's rudimentary 3D visuals. The motion-sensing Wii Remote could have translated photo-taking gameplay wonderfully. The Wii U actually did get a photography-focused first-party release in the form of Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water, and it seemed absolutely nonsensical that The Pokémon Company would ignore the potential of the Wii U GamePad to bring Snap 2 to life.

Even a portable sequel could have worked well on the 3DS, what with its built-in emphasis on photography and its capability to tap into augmented reality. Or a mobile game! How has that never happened, especially after Pokémon GO's goofy AR photo mode?

. . . OK, OK. Let me take a breath here. I'm just so frantically excited to know that this game finally exists that it seems to have uncorked decades' worth of pent-up frustration that it didn't exist before now. But I'm good. I'm going to be alright now.

For all you younger readers out there, thank you for enduring an aged Pokémon fan's rant. The description of what you can look forward to playing in New Pokémon Snap is simple: It's a game that will let you set out on a virtual photo-snapping safari. You will move along a pathway in a slow-rolling vehicle that drives itself, leaving you freed up to constantly spin around and look for the best Pokémon moments to capture on film. At the end of a few minutes, your trip will come to an end, you'll return to a home base and you'll evaluate the photos you took. Did you keep your subjects in the center of the frame? Did you manage to snap the pic at just the right moment, when a Pokémon was making a funny face or exhibiting some silly behavior?

It's a game of simple gameplay and simple joys, and it's simply amazing that it's taken this long for this reveal to arrive. For the record, I never lost hope! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO
RELEASE: TBA RATING: RP

KINGDOM HEARTS: MELODY OF MEMORY

Relive the memories (of PlayStation players).

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: TBA 2020 RATING: RP

WHILE THE WAIT for a Pokémon Snap sequel is finally coming to an end, another test of endurance that's gone on for nearly as long continues: the wait for a mainline Kingdom Hearts game to arrive on a Nintendo system. Granted, we've seen plenty of spin-offs and side stories over the years, including Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories on the Game Boy Advance in 2004, Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days on DS in 2009 and 2012's Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance on the 3DS. But in all that time, the primary installments in the series — the original Kingdom Hearts from 2002, 2006's Kingdom Hearts II and Kingdom Hearts III from just last year — have never reached Nintendo.

. . . And they still haven't! But we are perhaps one step closer to that reality thanks to this other new reveal: A rhythm game named Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory is bound for the Switch before the end of 2020. It will revisit many of the events of each of those older core adventures (and probably some of the spin-offs') and make the "memories" of them playable to the beat!

The same team that brought us the Theatrhythm games from a few years ago is likely the driving force behind this new mash-up of music and melee combat. We see Kingdom Hearts' key hero, Sora, wielding his Keyblade in rhythm with classic songs from the series, flanked to the left and right by his ever-present allies Donald Duck and Goofy, as well as temporary pals like Hercules and Aladdin. Not every stage's gameplay will be the same, though, as boss battles and revisited cutscenes from past titles seem to get their own spin on tapping buttons to the beat.

The weirdest part? It's all canon! This all plays out in connection with Kairi somehow, picking up her story from where it left off at the end of Kingdom Hearts III. Not that I would know myself, since I haven't played that one! But maybe if sales of this do well enough, Square Enix might finally bring it (or at least I and II) to the Switch too. We're waiting! **— LUCAS**

WHY DO SOME FANS GET SO BENT OUT OF SHAPE OVER THE PAPER MARIO SERIES?

JONATHAN VS. KRIS VS. DAVID VS. BRETT

THE REVEAL OF the all-new Paper Mario: The Origami King should have been cause for celebration. Instead, many fans approached it with caution . . . or even pre-emptive disgust! Why is that? Debate!

JONATHAN

Negative voices carry louder than neutral or positive ones, and sadly, there are plenty of folks online who care more about being heard than they do about saying anything worth hearing. Still, that's just the table setting for why some fans love to hate the announcements of new games in beloved franchises.

The core of the phenomenon boils down to two things: high expectations and a sense of ownership. And when it comes to Paper Mario, some fans have a huge amount of both. I'm not blaming them, though. Intentionally or not, they were set up to feel this way! That's because Super Mario RPG, and the first two Paper Mario games that followed, felt like every kid's first Mario fanfic come to life. They answer questions like "What if there was a Goomba who loved Mario as much as I do?", "What if the bad guys also had families, friends and favorite foods?" and, of course, "What if Koopas wore sweatshirts?". These are the kinds of things that many fans thought that only "weirdos like them" wondered about, but with Nintendo's first three Mario RPGs, they showed the world that they wondered about these things too, which inspired fans to feel a kinship with the company like never before. Then, by partaking in the games as active participants, players felt like co-authors and co-owners of the greatest Mario stories ever told. From an emotional perspective that's a pretty big deal.

Then, for no discernible reason, Nintendo just stopped making those kinds of Paper Mario games, and some fans felt abandoned and confused. They knew that Nintendo could make Mario RPGs with uniquely designed party members again, and the fan demand for them has never slowed, so why don't they? The question hovers over their perspective every time a new game in the series appears on the horizon, so when that announcement trailer finally hits they fully expect it to co-star a Bob-omb wearing a backwards baseball hat named "Fred Burst" or a heartthrob squid named "Justin Bloober." And every time, they come out disappointed — and thanks to the immediacy of social media, that disappointment becomes a collective anger that works like glue to bond them with other Paper Mario fans all over the world. You've seen the same thing happen at the release of every Star Wars movie since the original trilogy, and with countless other highly anticipated games, TV shows and movies over the years. The "disgruntled, jilted fan" has become a collective identity that, first and foremost, helps people feel included and validated by a larger group. It's an especially tempting path to take when you're already feeling left out of the target demographic for a game that you wish you were more interested in.

When people tell Nintendo that they pre-hate whatever new Paper Mario game is next in the pipeline, I can't help but feel for the developers behind the scenes. I'm sure that if it were up to them, they'd be working on a game that was 100% guaranteed to make every fan happy — but for a variety of reasons, that's not even remotely possible.

KRIS

Expectations are a heck of a thing, and they are certainly the largest source for most outrage, especially when it comes to the Paper Mario franchise. For those games in particular, there's a specific flavor that folks are looking for. When the series started to diverge from that with Super Paper Mario, it was fine — because the expectation was that Nintendo knew what fans liked about the series, so if they wanted to experiment for a little bit, that was OK as long as they returned to form next time, maybe incorporating elements of those experiments along the way. Trouble is, Nintendo either doesn't know or doesn't care what the fanbase wants out of a Paper Mario game anymore, and they just keep forging ahead with their experiments.

If the issue is the former, and Nintendo truly doesn't know what its fanbase wants, that's a bit confounding. It's not like social media platforms aren't there for them to look at and see what people think. How could they not know that the core fanbase is unhappy? Then again, Sticker Star, one of the most vocally "hated" games in the franchise, was the best selling Paper Mario game in years, so maybe Nintendo is getting mixed messages.

Of course, it's entirely possible Nintendo just doesn't care what the vocal fanbase thinks they should be doing. Nintendo has a habit of making the games they're inspired to make instead of cranking out sequels just because they should. (See: F-Zero.) As long as the games keep turning a profit and they're fulfilling the dev team's creativity, nothing else really matters, right?

As for the sense of ownership, that's an interesting point, especially when it relates to Star Wars like you mentioned. There's certainly something to be said for fans owning a piece of it, as they have memories attached to those original works, so when new iterations come out and they don't live up to those feelings associated with the originals, that can cause a degree of outrage. I've often suspected that a way to alleviate some of that negativity is to always have those original versions available for fans to relive. Unfortunately, like the theatrical versions of the original Star Wars trilogy, the most beloved Paper Mario, The Thousand-Year Door, is still only available on the system it was created for.

BRETT

I remember my first experience with fan backlash after the trailer for Wind Waker blew people's minds. I had no idea what to think. Most people I talked to hated the art direction, but I just wanted to play it for myself. I'm glad I did, because it moved the lore forward — and backward — in a way previously unseen. I loved it, and the art style lent itself to a beauty I'd yet to experience. It wasn't perfect, but it was grand and memorable. That is why when Nintendo shifts direction on something, I always play before forming an opinion, regardless of whether the last experiment was successful or not.

With the Paper Mario series, it's been hit or miss. I agree that most will say The Thousand-Year Door is the best of the series. It certainly has the most

content, but personally I enjoyed the companions of the first game more. Super Paper Mario's "companions" were more like Link's fairies with even less personality and basically were there to give Mario more abilities. The developers made up for it by making the villains much more interesting, and the story was great. The gameplay felt more like a platformer, which I'll admit was somewhat disappointing and jarring, but as I played on I enjoyed it more and more. Grinding was more fun, but I felt there were enough Mario platforming adventures, so I wanted an experience more akin to a traditional RPG. Sticker Star was a real low as a result, virtually eschewing the RPG mechanics completely. I didn't finish that one because it felt like a bland retread cash grab, and many other fans felt the same. However, I've never felt like berating the developers about it, or screaming from the rooftops that I had one poor experience with a beloved series. Sometimes experiments fail, and Nintendo has failed plenty. The important part is to learn from those failures, and I believe they really turned it around in Paper Mario: Color Splash, even though it still didn't feel like the first two.

DAVID

OK, so . . . first of all, the trailer. Did nothing for me. There was a quick spark of "Oh, a new Paper Mario game!" that quickly faded into "Oh, a new Paper Mario game . . . " — I am utterly indifferent to it, feeling neither highs nor lows. Maybe things will change when the game comes out, but my needle is so firmly in the middle right now, you might think it was stuck there.

It's not like I haven't been a fan of the franchise. Like many, I loved the first three games, and The Thousand-Year Door remains an all-time favorite of mine. (I even have a Goombella plush backpack a friend made me). Once the "new Paper Mario game!" sheen wore off of Sticker Star and Color Splash, though, I didn't care much for them. They're fine (but flawed) games, don't get me wrong, but fall well beneath the bar Paper Mario established for itself.

Sticker Star felt almost like the proto-Mario RPG. Imagine if there had been no other Paper Marios. No Mario & Luigi. Not even Legend of the Seven Stars — and someone decided to make a Mario RPG. Sticker Star feels like that first draft idea.

Color Splash was, in many ways, a huge improvement. Someone remembered that one of the series' most charming factors was the *humor!* It was a leap forward that didn't return the series to its glory days, but it felt a lot closer than its handheld sibling.

Origami King doesn't look like that kind of leap to me. If anything, it looks like they're picking up where they left off with Color Splash, and trying to inch ever closer to that former glory without actually committing to being what it once was.

And that just doesn't interest me.

JONATHAN

This is the kind of feedback that Nintendo might take seriously if they ever stumble upon it. It's neither insulting nor fawning, which shows it's coming from an undistorted perspective.

The thing is, though, I'm not sure Nintendo is looking for feedback. They're making the kinds of Paper Mario games they want to make, and if sales of Sticker Star are any indication, there are millions of people out there who are OK with that. They may not talk much about it, but they're out there, just as there were 17,000,000+ people who were more than happy to buy Pokémon Sword & Shield, though you may not have known it based on how #Dexit dominated those games' pre-release discourse.

Of course, the alternative to seeing Nintendo make the kinds of games they are inspired to create is to see them not make anything at all. That's why they haven't made an all-new game starring Samus since Other M. People didn't like that game, and I think Nintendo heard that feedback, so they probably said, "OK, if you don't like our ideas for this character, no problem. We'll just stop making games about her. There's plenty of other things we could be working on instead." Fans should know that when you tell a creator that you really dislike their work, it can actually drain them of their creative spark, energy vampire-style.

KRIS

I would agree that Nintendo doesn't typically take fan feedback into consideration, but correct me if I'm wrong, wasn't Twilight Princess a direct response to the fan reaction to Wind Waker?

DAVID

Pretty much. It was in response to sales of Wind Waker, for whatever that distinction may be worth. Incidentally, you'll notice that unless you include Link's Crossbow Training, they haven't kept to that revamped Twilight Princess visual style, either.

JONATHAN

Eiji Aonuma, the producer on the Zelda series, is way more of an audience chaser than Miyamoto. Every Zelda game since Majora's Mask has, in one form or another, been an apology for the last one. With Breath of the Wild being his biggest hit since Ocarina of Time, we can hope he'll stop apologizing and just go for it with Breath of the Wild 2.

DAVID

Bringing this back around to The Origami King: Reactions to something like this can be harsh because something like Paper Mario isn't like Madden or Call of Duty, where you get a new game every year, and if you don't like it, it's only a short time before the next is up. It's been nearly four years since the last Paper Mario, and almost 13 since Super (and Heaven help you if you wanted something like the first two games — 16 years!). As with most Nintendo properties, if a new game is revealed and it doesn't look good, you're out of luck for the next few years, at least. So yeah, I can see why people might be wary when seeing something like The Origami King revealed for the first time. For some, it's not what they want, or even what Nintendo has *conditioned* them to want from Paper Mario. And since that isn't it, an already long wait continues on.

BRETT

I think the wait is a really good point, and may be the source of most of the frustration. If a game is a real failure — like Other M, which Jonathan mentioned, Nintendo does tend to shy away from the series for a while. Years go by, and the series gets starved for attention. Franchises in that situation need to have traditional sequels to reignite their fans — they shouldn't get experiments, like Federation Force. That felt like a new IP at E3 and I was surprised to see Metroid tacked on. Imagine any other Nintendo series not starring the character from that series!

I like that Nintendo doesn't tend to churn out phoned-in sequels like a lot of the game industry. There is usually something to set each game in the series apart from the others gameplay-wise, as well as narrative-wise. It's typically not just a small difference either. They try to bring something special to each entry, and maybe that is where Sticker Star failed the most. Stickers just weren't enough.

DAVID

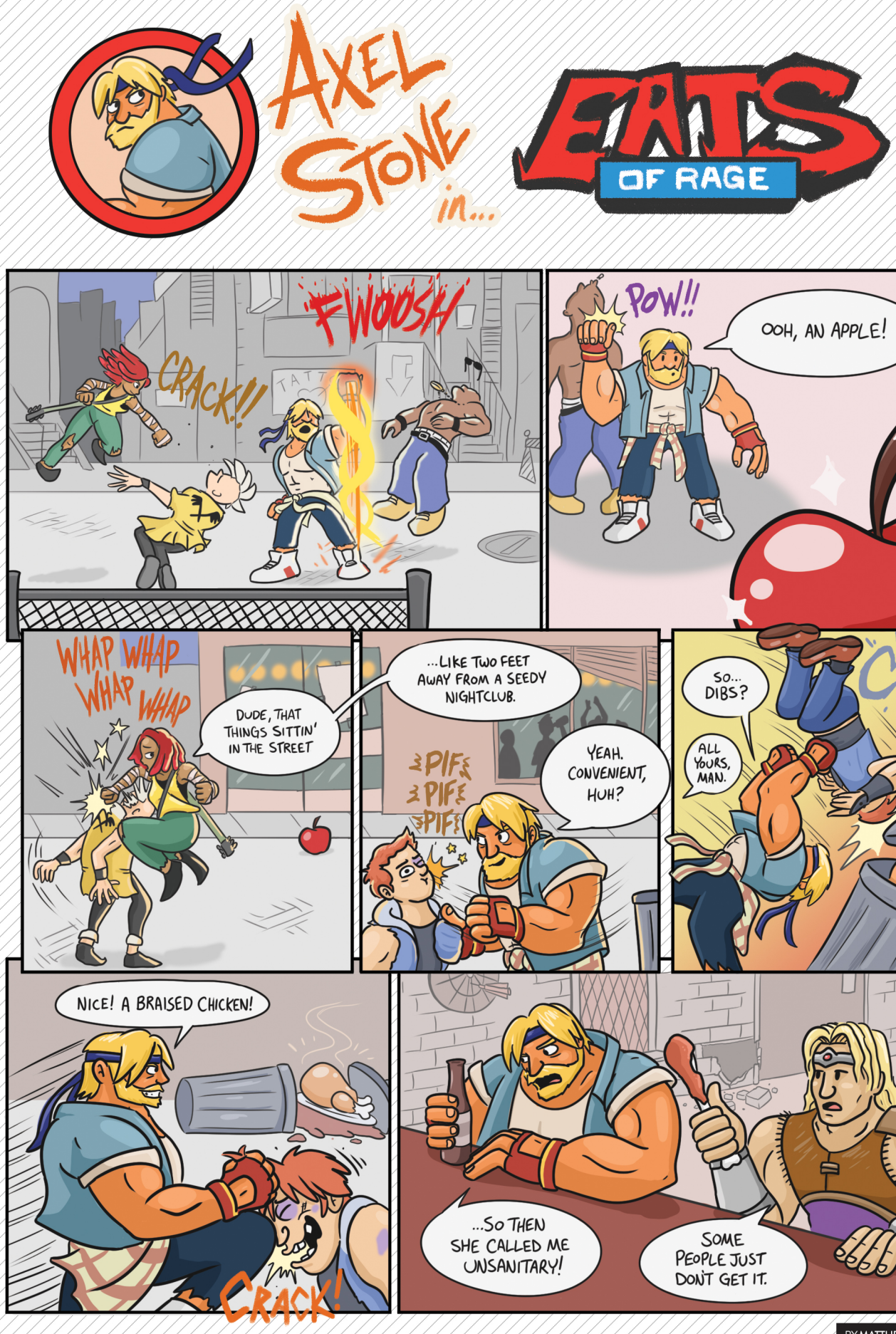
You know, I can't help but wonder if Color Splash would have been more warmly received if it had been more of a Splatoon-based adventure instead of Paper Mario.

BRETT

I think Color Splash mainly had lukewarm sales due to being a later release on the Wii U, but the Splatoon concept would have been interesting.

DAVID

Sales-wise, being on the Wii U definitely played a part. I just mean taking the same core gameplay and applying it to a property that has fewer expectations behind it. Splatoon is still a young brand — it could endure a few experiments without enraging millions of fans. Paper Mario, on the other hand, seems doomed to disappoint its most vocal followers from now on. NF



BY MATTHEW TARANTO

GO GO AXEM RANGERS!

SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS
SNES, 1996

Nintendo might have reined in the Paper Mario series' creative scope to keep the cast of characters locked down to mostly vanilla-flavored Mushroom Kingdom denizens at this point, but that just makes the contrast to the franchise's forefather all the more striking! Super Mario RPG was jam-packed with kooky, crazy, one-off oddballs whom we've never seen again since, and the development team even allowed themselves to make pop culture references – like the homage to the Power Rangers seen above! The Axem Rangers were rainbow-hued antagonists who all wielded, well, axes! Their boss battle was one of the best in the game (though having Mario leap into a Megazord could have really sent it over the top). The Saturday morning love continued into the Paper Mario series proper when the next game featured a shout-out to the Ninja Turtles! – **LUCAS**

CHARACTER PROFILE
PAPER PEACH

Princess Toadstool's 2D doppelgänger has served as little more than an alternate art style alternative for two decades. But is this paper princess about to take on more of her own personality . . . by becoming a villain?! Let's investigate further!

FIRST APPEARANCE
PAPER MARIO (2001)

CAREER HIGHS

CAREER LOWS

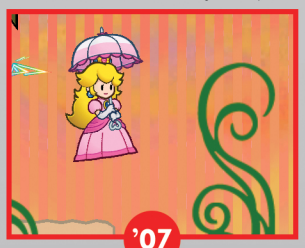
'01

She managed to engineer her own escape from captivity, though . . . and was even able to find Bowser's diary!

'01

As you might have expected, her career began with a kidnapping. Bowser swiped her during a party!

'07



Once again, though, she escapes the clutches of the Koopa King and sets off on her own heroic journey!

'07

The third Paper Mario game begins with an unhappy matrimony! Peach is forced to marry Bowser! Yuck!

'16

She inspired the creation of the massive Papercraft Peach, used to stomp Papercraft Bowser Jr. flat!

'16

In Color Splash, her role is restricted. She mostly just sends holographic "Holo-Peach" messages to Mario.

Since the beginning of the Paper Mario series, Paper Peach has slowly set herself apart from her flesh-and-blood counterpart – though her time in the spotlight has been somewhat inconsistent.

'20

Now, though, it looks like she's being set up to be front-and-center for an all-new narrative – and not as a damsel in distress, but rather the one *causing* distress for Mario!

HIGHLIGHTS

PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR
GAMECUBE, 2004

Is history repeating itself? Though Paper Peach has mostly been featured as the deuteragonist of the Paper Mario series, she first became an antagonist near the end of the series' second game, when she was possessed by the Shadow Queen! Has that evil stayed lurking within?

SUPER PAPER MARIO
Wii, 2007

Three years later, she seemed to be back to her normal self. Super Paper Mario is where her heroic star has shone brightest in the series so far, as she broke free of being a bride-to-be and then became a full playable character – bringing back her long, hovering jumps from Super Mario Bros. 2! Her selflessness even led to her trying to rescue the game's most annoying villain, Mimi, from certain doom!

PAPER MARIO: THE ORIGAMI KING
SWITCH, 2020

Paper Peach has been a paragon of purity up to this point, aside from when she got possessed – but it seems like Sticker Star and Color Splash sidelining her side stories has crumpled up her good will! She's now taking the spotlight back by force, folding herself into the new Origami Peach and antagonizing our hero right from the start. Is she truly evil now, or perhaps possessed again? We'll find out soon!

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

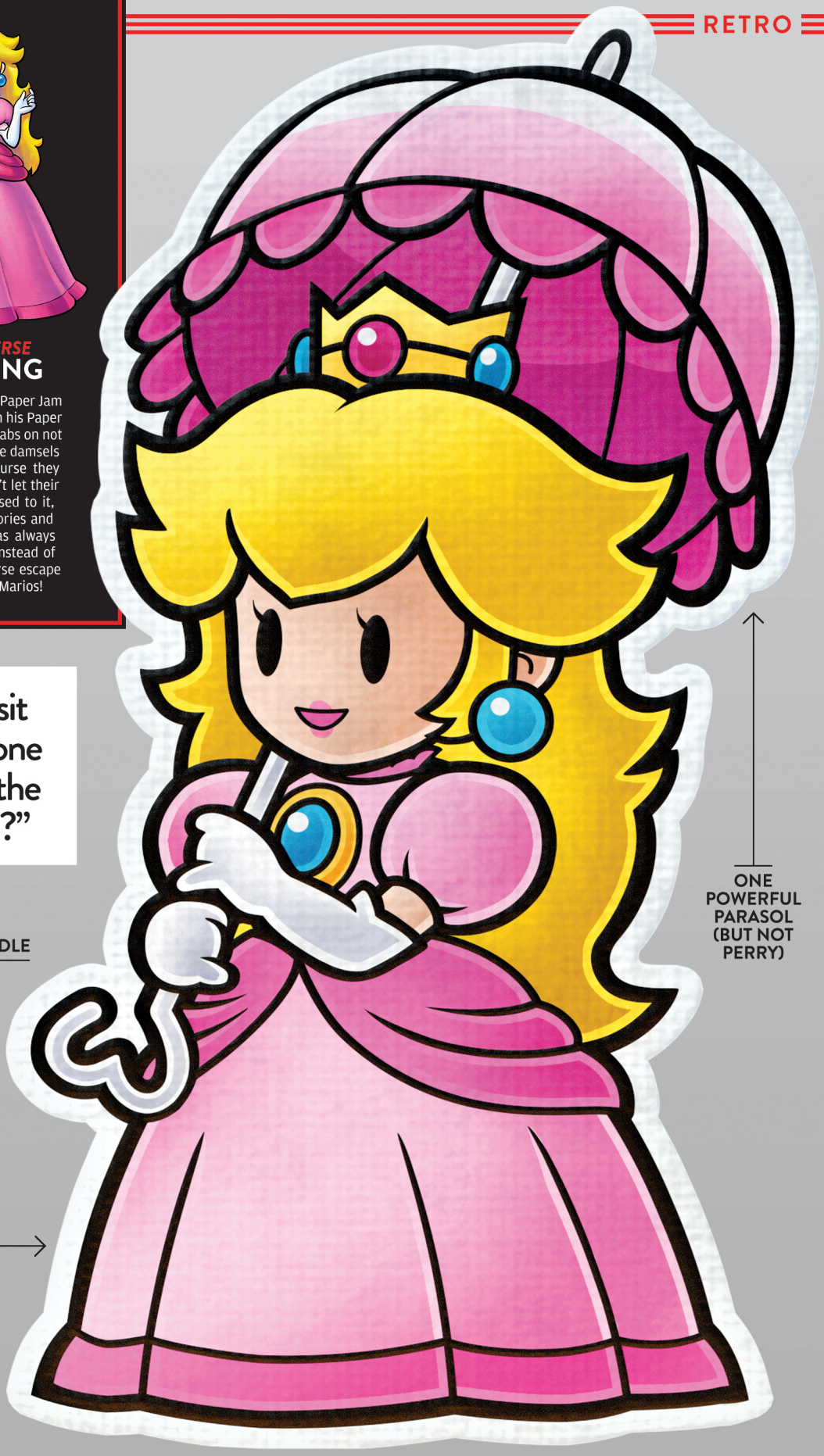
COUNTERPARTS CONVERSE

A ROYAL MEETING

While most of the events of Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam focus on the heroic team-up of Mario with his Paper alter ego, a heartwarming B story keeps tabs on not one, but two Princess Peaches! Double the damsels means double the kidnapping, so of course they both get captured early on. But they don't let their captivity get them down (they're both used to it, after all), as they cheerfully swap life stories and fashion advice. (Did you know Peach has always wanted to try wearing a maroon dress instead of her standard pink?) Oh, and they of course escape without needing any assistance from the Marios!

"Well, I can't just sit here and let everyone else go off to save the worlds, now, can I?"

- SUPER PAPER MARIO



LEFT IN THE PAST

DR. MARIO 64

Remembering this sequel's Paper Mario-inspired story mode.

DR. MARIO HAS been playable on nearly every Nintendo platform ever released, bringing fresh takes on the basic formula every time. The Super NES paired it with Tetris, the 3DS added power-ups to the mix and the new mobile game has given medical degrees to everyone from Waluigi to a stack of Goombas! But as fun as those games are, there's only one prescription for the ultimate Dr. Mario experience: Take one Nintendo 64, add four controllers and a copy of the brilliant-yet-overlooked Dr. Mario 64 (then call us in the morning).

At its core, Dr. Mario 64 is the same color-matching puzzle game you've seen for generations. What sets this particular iteration apart are its unique features, not the least of which includes a fully-fledged story mode with a rather unexpected art style.

The adventure unfolds via a series of cutscenes that bear a striking resemblance to Paper Mario! The characters themselves are still images placed on what look like cardboard cutouts. Whenever their expressions or actions change, the cardboard flips over and on the other side is whatever the next "animation" for the character would be.

It doesn't run through the whole game, though. While the title screen and cutscenes all make Dr. Mario 64 look like Paper Mario's long-lost cousin, during gameplay the cast appears as beautifully animated cartoons, marking the first time many of them had been seen as anything other than Game Boy sprites.

You play as either Dr. Mario or Wario, and depending on whom you pick, the same story plays out from different perspectives. You encounter a series of characters from the Wario Land franchise, stopping each time to defeat them in a round of classic Dr. Mario puzzling before moving on to the next.

As for the story itself, flu season has struck, and it's up to Dr. Mario to use his cure-all Megavitamins to heal the citizens of the Mushroom Kingdom. Wario witnesses the power of these Megavitamins and decides to steal them to turn a profit . . . but he isn't the only pill pilferer about. Mad Scienstein, a kooky character originally introduced in the Japan-only Game Boy game For the Frog the Bell Tolls, is also out to get the mighty medicine, and he'll stop at nothing to do so! But he's not alone. A hidden shadowy figure is responsible for Mad Scienstein's thievery: none other than Wario Land 3's Rudy, a clown monster who wants the Megavitamins to cure his cold. Once you defeat him, if you've played well enough to that point, you get to face off against an unlockable bonus character: either Metal Mario or Vampire Wario.

Dr. Mario 64 is more than just a cool story mode, though. To this day, it remains the only version of Dr. Mario that supports a local four-player mode, which, considering the other platforms its follow-ups were released for, is especially grievous. It was also the first game to add two new songs called "Cube" and "Que Que" (later renamed "Cough" and "Sneeze") to the series' soundtrack, though both are oddly missing in subsequent iterations! Same goes for a pair of game modes: Marathon and Score Attack. In Marathon, you play against an endlessly respawning army of viruses and see how far you can get, while Score Attack has you try to rack up as many points as possible within a limited time.

It's strange that Dr. Mario 64 isn't mentioned more often when discussing the legacy of the Nintendo 64. It may be missing Miracle Cure's Laboratory puzzles or Dr. Luigi's L-shaped pills, but it offers a more complete package than the franchise has seen before or since. For the best virus busting around, Dr. Mario 64's still got the cure. **— KRIS**

ORIGINAL RELEASE:
NINTENDO 64, APRIL 8, 2001
PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO

PLAYING IT TODAY

Dr. Mario 64 was one of the final N64 cartridges to make it to retail shelves. You could probably track down a used loose cart . . . or else cross your fingers and hope for an N64 Classic Edition!

IN OTHER MARKETS

Dr. Mario 64 has technically been re-released twice since its debut — just not in America! It came to the China-exclusive iQue Player, as well as the Japan-only Nintendo Puzzle Collection for GameCube. The iQue version is simply a Chinese localization of the game, but Nintendo Puzzle Collection is a bit more interesting. It features not only a Japanese translated version of Dr. Mario 64, but completely unique versions of Yoshi's Cookie and Panel de Pon as well, including exclusive artwork and game modes. It also marks the first time Dr. Mario 64 was released in Japan, despite it having been developed there!

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION

I AM A TEACHER: SUPER MARIO SWEATER

You know Paper Mario. But what about Textile Mario?

ORIGINAL RELEASE:
FAMICOM DISK SYSTEM, AUGUST 27, 1986
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: ROYAL KOUGYOU

PLAYING IT TODAY

Importing a Famicom Disk System and tracking down one of the original I Am a Teacher disks is probably entirely impractical . . . but if you did it and actually made a sweater as a result? Wowza!

KNIT-TENDO POWER

In 2018, the team behind retroUSB (makers of the "HD NES" AVS console) was inspired by the original ad copy (above) to make their own version of the Nintendo Knitting Machine. They presented it at that year's Portland Retro Game Expo, demonstrating its capability to knit colorful patterns featuring all sorts of iconic Nintendo imagery, from Super Mushrooms to Hyrule's royal crest. The first step was getting a Brother KH910 computer-controlled knitting machine to interface with an NES cartridge. "We simply needed to create a ROM that output the same signal that the original computer program did," they said. retroUSB's Brian Parker accomplished this by modifying their game Power Coloring (a homebrew NES coloring book), with the knitting machine connected to the NES with a cable from its serial port to the NES' controller port. The pattern being knit would be displayed on the screen, with a row indicator that moved upward each time the machine's operator pushed the carriage to the right. Finally, after slapping a few Nintendo logo decals on it, it was done! Sadly, the reborn Nintendo Knitting Machine was a one-off project just for the PRGE. "Each year, we try to do some type of tech demo/display that involves [the] NES." It goes to show that there are still new ways to tinker with old machinery and do amazing things!

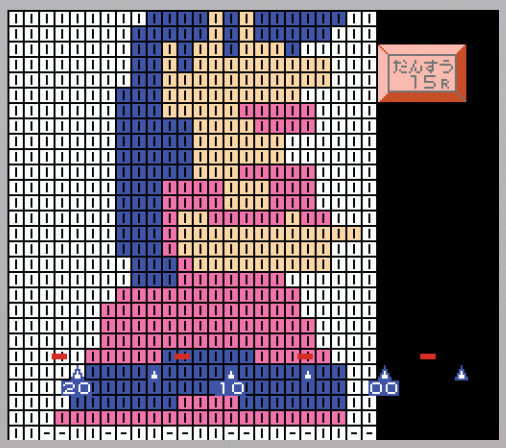
NINTENDO HAS BEEN coming up with new ways for people to enjoy their core hardware almost since their inception. Some of their ideas have gone on to receive universal praise (Nintendo Labo), while others fell by the wayside (anyone remember the Wii Vitality Sensor?). In what was probably the most niche way to emphasize the Family part of Family Computer, Japanese manufacturer Royal Kougyou (producer of various sewing and crafting tools) released a pair of instructional video games for the Famicom Disk System in 1986. Branded with the name "I Am a Teacher" — with the English words written in katakana — the two titles were marketed to knitters who wanted to make their own sweaters. (The English word "am" is written as "amu" in Japanese, which also happens to be the verb "to knit!")

"I Am a Teacher: Super Mario Sweater" featured 15 different sweater, cardigan and vest designs, including some with color work featuring Mario, Princess Toadstool, Goombas and other icons from the original Super Mario Bros. By inputting height, chest measurement, sleeve length and the gauge of the yarn you were using (the number of stitches and rows in a 10 cm square), the software would generate a complete blueprint for a sweater. Each part — front, back, sleeves and finishing touches like the collar or bands for the buttons — would be displayed on-screen, complete with measurements, the amount of stitches and rows and the type of stitches and color work you'd need to perform. The diagrams could be scrolled back and forth with the Control Pad or moved up and down by row using the A and B buttons, with handy markers for every 10 stitches and an indicator for which row you were on. And since this was the Famicom Disk System, you could save your place when you were ready to put down your needles for the day.

Unfortunately, as I discovered, adults can't enter in their own measurements, or the measurements of a plush toy or doll — the patterns are all designed to fit young children. Then again, if you know your way around knitting patterns, you might just be able to adapt them to make the perfect Nintendo ugly Christmas sweaters for the whole family!

If you don't know your knits from your purls, then worry not! There's also "I Am a Teacher: Teami no Kiso" (Basics of Hand Knitting). Not only did this second "game" feature a sweater blueprint generator, but you could also watch some animated demonstrations of the most common stitches and techniques. As a knitter myself, I wish these titles had been around during my days of knitting club at the library!

Nintendo of America apparently got some inspiration from the I Am a Teacher series, and in 1987, they demonstrated an unusual peripheral for the NES at Las Vegas' Winter Consumer Electronics Show: the Nintendo Knitting Machine. Former Nintendo of America president Howard Phillips was one of the demonstrators, and reminisced about it on his Facebook page along with the original promotional ad copy (shown in the sidebar). According to Phillips, the NES displayed the pattern and tracked your progress, while the machine's operator moved the shuttle and did the casting on and binding off. While it was reported that it would cost less than $100, interest among the attendees was less than stellar, and the actual show floor prototype has sadly been lost to time. **— REBECCA**



WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

ONE GREAT THING about Nintendo Power covers back in the day was their originality. For July 1995's NP #74, as with the previous November, Donkey Kong stole the show with a wholly original rendered scene not found anywhere else. August followed with a special Virtual Boy cover feature for Issue #75 that went even further beyond, featuring ChromaDepth 3D glasses for subscribers to help immerse themselves in the visuals!

Hindsight is a funny thing, though. With these two cover features, Chrono Trigger — released that August — would miss the spotlight. All these years later, Donkey Kong Land and the Virtual Boy are but footnotes in Nintendo's history, whereas Chrono Trigger remains one of the most beloved RPGs of all time. It was covered thoroughly inside, at least.

In addition to DK and CT, NP #74 looked at Judge Dredd, Nosferatu (sharing poster space with Boogerman) and Jungle Strike, plus Animaniacs on Game Boy, with Take 2 Reviews of Power Instinct, SWAT Kats: The Radical Squadron, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie and the Game Boy's World Heroes 2 Jet. Alongside Chrono Trigger, Epic Center took us inside what was happening with RPGs in Japan and provided EarthBound strategies.

Donkey Kong Country, The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past and Final Fantasy III stood atop the Super NES Top 20, with The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening and Donkey Kong Land doing the Game Boy proud. Believe it or not, The Lion King for Game Boy was the #1 movie-based game, outdoing Jurassic Park 2 and even its Super NES big brother! Mortal Kombat 3 and Killer Instinct topped the Most Wanted list, and the first entries in The Legend of Zelda, Final Fantasy and Dragon Warrior (a.k.a. Quest) series were inducted into the Hall of Fame.

Coverage of the industry's first-ever (!) Electronic Entertainment Expo, a.k.a. E3, slung some mud at Sega and Sony while highlighting EarthBound, Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest and Killer Instinct for the Super NES. The Virtual Boy was also on display, and Acclaim had a motion capture demonstration. Rounding things out were an interview with Shiny's Dave Perry about industry affairs and a bizarre "Top 5 Predictions from E3."

A four-page feature provided a look at how Advanced Computer Modeling (ACM) is done, Sports Scene featured fishing and racing, and this month's Player's Poll winner would receive an Exertainment exercise bike from Life Fitness. Pak Watch closed things out with peeks at Diddy's Kong Quest, Yoshi's Island, Robotech for Ultra 64 and the Nintendo Power Source Summer Camp on America Online.

NP #75's 20 pages of Virtual Boy coverage featured such titles as Mario's Tennis, Galactic Pinball, Teleroboxer and Mario Clash, as well as plenty of info about the system itself. Yoshi's Island got another six pages, and was joined by Phantom 2040 (sharing poster time with Killer Instinct) and Ninja Gaiden Trilogy for the Super NES. A surge of Game Boy titles included Street Fighter II, Judge Dredd, Earthworm Jim and Arcade Classics Missile Command, Centipede, Millipede and Asteroids. Epic Center's Chrono Trigger coverage continued, joined by Tecmo's Secret of the Stars.

The four-page feature "Going to Code College" introduced many Power Players to Digipen and the then-revolutionary idea of going to school to learn how to make video games. The Top 20 echoed the previous issue's, with A Link to the Past voted the Top Adventure Game and the Ultra 64 taking the top Most Wanted spot. This month's Player's Poll winner got to be a VIP guest at the Mortal Kombat Live Tour, and Pak Watch closed things out with Primal Rage, Mega Man 7 and Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Fighting Edition. **— DAVID**

EPIC REVIEW

CHRONO TRIGGER™

As the biggest and best RPG in history nears its release date in America, Epic Center begins the exploration with an overview of Chrono Trigger's main characters, features and plots. If you love FF3, Mana or Zelda, Chrono Trigger is guaranteed to become your new passion.

AN ADVENTURE IN TIME

Square Soft's upcoming RPG, Chrono Trigger, is destined to be its biggest game ever. This massive 32-megabit game has all the elements that attracted hundreds of thousands of players to the Final Fantasy series, but it improves on Final Fantasy in almost every area. In fact, once you begin playing Chrono Trigger, you'll wonder how you were ever happy with anything less.

As reported last month in the Epic Center, the award-winning development team at Square made dramatic improvements to the graphics, sound and game play. The variety and quality of the graphics become apparent early on as you walk through the Millennial Fair, or later as you watch in horror as the Day of Lavos is replayed on a computer console, showing the devastation of earth. You can race on a jet bike in the far distant future or shunt through time warp to the age of dinosaurs. Animations range from the leaping attacks and magical Tech Shots during battles to cinematic plays that set a new standard for video games. As for the music, it challenges Donkey Kong Country and Killer Instinct as the best for any video game. There is so much music and so many sound effects that you might wonder how Square manages to compress it all. In short, this is it, the game for which all adventure fans have waited. If all this sounds a little too good to be true, that's what we thought, too, until we started playing Chrono Trigger, and fell in love with it.

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©1995 Bird Studio/Shueisha
Illustrated by Akira Toriyama

THE PLAY IS THE THING

Why is this game so irresistible? Here's an example: Imagine that you have just returned from a heroic adventure only to find yourself suddenly thrown on trial. That's the situation that Crono finds himself in early in the game. With the background of a splendid but menacing court of justice, Crono faces the arguments of a prosecutor who has all the cards. They condemn Crono with his own actions, which are shown in scenes recorded earlier in the game. In the end, you see how you have been set up, and then the jury comes in, finds you guilty and sentences you to be executed in three days. And you were just trying to help! The best part of this whole scene, however, is that it is all based on your actions. If you are extremely careful in the Millennial Fair, you may be pronounced innocent.

Chrono Trigger is more than a sum of beautiful parts. The game contains innovations in play, as well. First off, as in an adventure game like Secret of Mana or The Legend of Zelda: A Link To The Past, you won't stumble blindly into enemies that suddenly appear as you wander around the overworld map. In Chrono Trigger, you won't run into any enemies on the largest maps. The close-up maps where you interact with other characters is also the setting for attacks.

When you see an enemy, you can avoid it in many cases, or at least get prepared to battle the beast. The actual battle takes place right there in the encounter screen. Your characters take up battle positions and the battle menu pops up with your options.

One innovation used in Chrono Trigger battles is the Combo attack. Combos make use of the strengths of two of your party members by combining their attacks. For instance, the Fire Whirl Combo uses Crono's Cyclone attack and Lucca's Flame Toss. The result is an attack with far more power and range than either of the individual moves.

If you're a fan of adventure games you'll find Chrono Trigger to be filled with the types of activities and puzzles that you love. Your earliest explorations lead you to the Millennial Fair where games of skill allow you to win Silver Points that can be used in several areas or exchanged for money. You can test your strength, fight a robot, guess the outcome of a footrace, enter a soda chugging contest or enter a fun house where the challenges vary. To clear dungeon areas, you'll have to solve puzzles in the form of door switches, secret passages, and hidden items.

ISSUE #74: JULY 1995

ISSUE #75: AUGUST 1995

BY THOR THORVALDSON

DATE OF BIRTH
Long, long ago

PLACE OF BIRTH
Japan

FAVORITE FOOD
Strawberries

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Chief Onion at Onion Games

BEST KNOWN FOR
Moon, Dandy Dungeon, Chulip

YOSHIRO KIMURA

Insights into game design, and life in general, from the top of the food chain at Onion Games.

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: When you first started in games, where did you think your work would take you, and is it anywhere like where you've ended up today?
KIMURA: Thinking back to the very first game I made when I was 12 years old (a version of the classic "Snake"), I guess it's fair to say I may have evolved just a little bit. Creating a game in those days was about pioneering a place that no one had ever seen, and in that respect, nothing much has changed now.

When I make a new game, I don't think of it in terms of where the market is, but rather taking my consciousness to a totally unknown dimension that no one has ever seen, just like I did back then.

Square Enix is a huge company now, but you were there back in the SNES days, just a few years after Final Fantasy saved them from closing. How does your experience there compare to where you are now, working on indie games that look and feel a lot like games from that same generation?
That whole era was a great experience — I have nothing but fond memories of colleagues who I admired and respected, gorgeous pixels and beautiful music coming out of SNES hardware. All of that still drives and feeds what I do now.

But, at the time, the company got so much bigger, so rapidly, and it's not easy for me to be happy in big crowds. My company right now is totally ideal — it's like a small theater troupe.

Those pixels have stuck with me, though, and I still am happy I get to work with them even now.

Moon: Remix RPG was released in 1997, and has gone on to be a huge influence on developers throughout the world. Now over 20 years later, it's arguably more popular than ever, having topped the charts on the Japanese Switch eShop for weeks on end after its release there. What do you think it is about the game that has allowed it to be so timeless?
To be totally honest, I don't really think about Moon in terms of its success or popularity. All of that is just a part of the past that fades like smoke as time goes by. What remains is the work, and the story.

As we remastered Moon, going back and re-observing not just my old work, but my youth itself, was a deep and quiet journey. It was fatiguing but also joyful. It was a strange trip.

Ultimately I came away feeling like this: Moon is like my alter ego. My doppelgänger. A ghost of my younger self. But the me I am now is different than the me I was in the past. So, all I want to do is keep inventing new stories for myself. They might be similar to Moon, or they might be totally different.

After Moon, you worked on Chulip (the kissing RPG) and Rule of Rose (a disturbing schoolgirl survival horror title), two PS2 games that have also made a lasting mark on audiences, fetching high prices on the resale market. They both deal with issues that most adults have struggled with before, like the challenge of finding a girlfriend (or boyfriend) or the discomfort of being in a social clique that may not actually have your best intentions at heart. Despite the universality of these very human themes, few game developers other than yourself have dared to take them on so directly. Why do you think it is that you chose to go against the grain and create these kinds of wholly unique experiences?
To me, Chulip's theme is simply "What is happiness?". Happiness isn't just about money. I wanted to explore all the different kinds of happiness.

With Rule of Rose, I was thinking about love in terms of an emotion that binds things together, by force. Women, men, children, everyone — loving each other is an act of binding each others' freedom. That's the story I wanted to tell.

Humans are asking and desperately searching for answers to these questions, every day, about love, about happiness — all of these universal themes. I'm the same as everyone, just something like a traveler seeking out the same sorts of answers about life.

Little King's Story, the adorable satire of monarchy, and No More Heroes 2, a tribute/parody of ultra-violent games and gamers, are two of your most well-known Wii games. In their own ways, they fuse traditional themes in action games, like saving princesses and seeking revenge, with a kind of comedy that makes you, the player, feel like funnier people for having experienced them. How do you go about making a game that doesn't just tell jokes to the player, but instead allows the player to take part in their own virtual ensemble comedy?
Put simply, one of the things I love the most is conversations that "go beyond" something, whether that's common sense, or "the fourth wall." I love storylines that don't just expand the world of the story, but the world of the players themselves.

Shortly after No More Heroes 2 was released, you formed Onion Games, a wholly independent game studio. If you could, please walk us through a day in the life of you, the one and only Chief Onion (hum hum).
Before I formed Onion Games, I didn't have a job at all, and — in an era when most companies were focused on creating "social" games — I wondered if I even had a place in video games at all.

Then I went to the Independent Games Festival in 2012, and I was saved. I saw all of these strange and wonderful games that weren't like anything I'd ever seen before, one after another, and I literally started to cry. It was the same feeling as tearing up in front of profoundly majestic nature.

From then on, I decided to put everything into making exactly the games that I wanted to make, every day, and I haven't stopped for the past eight years.

Black Bird is a shmup that takes place in what appears to be a fictional version of Europe, and features a fully operatic score sung in a fictional language that sounds like English through the filter of someone who doesn't know the language. How did you come up with this wild concept, and how do you feel about how it's been received so far?
My view of the world is a bizarre jumble made up of both knowledge and firsthand memories of many, many different places. When I was younger, I visited Europe many times, of course, but also many countries in Africa and around the Middle East.

On one of those trips, I heard locals singing a mysterious religious song on an overcrowded long-distance bus trip, and it gave me the joyful sense of being in an entirely different world than I was used to. That's exactly the sort of experience I think is useful for creating games, and I think composer Hirofumi Taniguchi's music for Black Bird captures that spirit perfectly.

Dandy Dungeon stars a 36-year-old game developer who puts his whole heart into his games. He stays up all night coding, then quits his job at a hugely successful game publisher and, eventually, tries to use his games to romance the love of his life. It's as inspirational of an indie development story as anyone could ask for, complete with boss battles against whip-wielding office managers and magic-using CEOs. The gameplay is similarly lighthearted, making complex RPG systems easily digestible with a one-touch control scheme and easy-to-learn, hard-to-master, maze-based gameplay. Who was your ideal audience for the game? Was it me? I feel like it was just for me, but based on its popularity, I have to believe that you had more than just one person in mind when you created it . . . ?
My idea of a good game is one that's made of simple mechanics and a deep mystery. The mechanics of Dandy Dungeon just simply flashed into my mind when I was in a coffee shop, and, it turned out, they worked really well!

I really love roguelike games, but the idea of a roguelike centered around tracing a single line through a dungeon really inspired me. To be honest, more or less all of the level design elements were in place from Day 1. I was extremely lucky to have just suddenly dreamed up this entire idea.

Your games feel very Japanese to me, yet they also speak in a voice that transcends conventional cultural boundaries. Part of it is the humor, which works in any language, but there's also something in the spirit of them that's hard to define. Having been in the industry for so long, and having found fans around the world, where do you see yourself in the grand scheme of the game industry today, and where do you see yourself headed next?
Honestly, I am fundamentally a pretty lonely creature, but making games connects me and the outside world, whichever world that is. I think it's a pretty rare and special job for me. I don't always know where my next games will come from, where they will take place, or what will have inspired them, but I always want to make games that feel like wild journeys through my own strange stories.

Would you want to work on any established Nintendo franchises, or if given the choice, would you rather continue your focus on completely original works?
This is a difficult question, because by definition if I made a game with Nintendo characters, it just wouldn't be "my" game. But if I *had* to choose . . . of any game that's ever been on a Nintendo system . . . it'd be Red Alarm on the Virtual Boy.

BY JONATHAN HOLMES

REVIEWS

Pining for more playable partners than Paper Mario provides? Ajna recruits a crew of 20 totally unique Incarnations in Indivisible! (And its battle system is a bit more traditional too.) Read our review!

The Spirits Within

INDIVISIBLE

SWITCH PUBLISHER: 505 GAMES
DEVELOPER: LAB ZERO GAMES
RATING: T

LAB ZERO GAMES knows fighting games. Their work on Skullgirls demonstrates a level of expertise in the field that rivals that of major studios like Capcom and Bandai Namco. This much is indisputable.

From the moment they announced their follow-up title Indivisible — a sidescrolling RPG influenced by tri-Ace's PlayStation classic Valkyrie Profile — it was clear that Lab Zero was ready and willing to step outside of their wheelhouse. However, as much as the team's ambition is to be commended, the final product doesn't entirely nail the landing, due to certain decisions that sounded great on paper but were implemented in a fashion less than ideal.

A lot of these issues stem from the need to balance overworld exploration with the demands of the combat system. One half of Indivisible is a Metroidvania, replete with platforming hazards and progression gates that require certain techniques to bypass. Bumping into an enemy triggers a battle scene that, similar to Chrono Trigger, unfolds on the terrain on which you're currently standing. Also like Chrono Trigger, an active timer is constantly running, urging quick decisions and even quicker timed button reflexes to defend against incoming attacks, as in Mario & Luigi.

Each of your four selected party members is assigned a face button. Rather than choose commands from a text menu, you trigger one of three actions by pressing a button and tilting the control stick. Furthermore, you can activate multiple characters at a time, stringing combos together and compounding damage by waiting to launch follow-up attacks until just the right moment. It's this infusion of fighting game DNA that promises to deliver a complexity unlike what you'd find in traditional turn-based JRPGs.

That promise is met, but only to a point. The advantages that certain techniques have over others are nigh universal, no matter what monstrosity you're facing. Once you discover the ideal sequence of moves that yields that greatest impact, merely repeat that sequence right on through to the credits. What need is there for experimentation when 99% of combat situations can be approached in an identical manner?

Until then, battles are tense yet exciting exercises. It's also true that enemy encounters halt your forward progress — even low-level mooks that pop up late in the game consume a non-insignificant chunk of time. Thus, in the interest of maintaining a brisk pace, enemies in the overworld are spaced far apart, and most all can be avoided entirely. The downside to such "social distancing" is that environments feel barren, exacerbated by the fact that there are no treasure chests to hunt or free-floating items to acquire. The sole pick-ups in the entire game are these 100+ hidden jewels called Ringsels that boost your party's defense and increase the number of actions per battle. If not for them, there would be no reason to explore the vast, barren expanses across your 30-hour journey.

Make no mistake, anyone would happily lose themselves in this world if given the opportunity. When conceiving Indivisible, Lab Zero turned to Southeast Asian culture and religion — not the oft-traveled Chinese and Japanese landscapes, but Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia and other such underrepresented regions — to inform the lore and character motivations. Pepper in some Mesoamerica and a dash of British imperialism, and you've got one of the most diverse gaming showcases in recent memory!

This diversity extends to the playable cast, who are all phenomenally voice acted and oozing with personality. Our main heroine is Ajna, a headstrong 16-year-old with a nasty habit of punching first and asking questions later. After her village is

7.0

razed and her father murdered, she embarks upon a quest of vengeance against the warlord Ravannavar, whose goal is to revive the goddess Kala and reset all life on the planet.

. . . OK, so Indivisible may not be breaking any new narrative ground, but the staleness of the story is offset by the allies Ajna meets along her journey. There are a whopping 20 unique "Incarnations" to recruit — including a giant warrior mama, Phoebe; an armless dancer with impossibly long legs, Yan; and a justice-espousing Kamen Rider knock-off, Naga Rider — each drawn and animated as fluidly as any of the Skullgirls starlets. And with the personal exception of Zahra (who lacks any offensive capabilities and instead boosts the party's stats by playing music on her lute-like oud), each one is an absolute joy to command in battle.

These Incarnations and their humorous yet heartwarming interactions with Ajna are Indivisible's biggest strength — that they reside in a separate dimension within Ajna's third eye while not in battle draws further attention to the game's central theme of "together as one." But as is the case with any game sporting a massive number of characters, not everybody is given enough time in the spotlight. If they aren't part of the core squad, their relationship with young Ajna goes from 0 to 60 in no time flat. For example, the mercenary Latigo jumps out of hiding from a steamy alley in the Iron Kingdom, and literally seconds later he's welcomed as a trusted member of the friendship crew. Even non-optional Incarnations miss out on a lot of the nuance upon which a slower-paced narrative would likely place greater focus. For the sake of believability, Indivisible could stand to have more character-building downtime that doesn't necessarily factor directly into the plot.

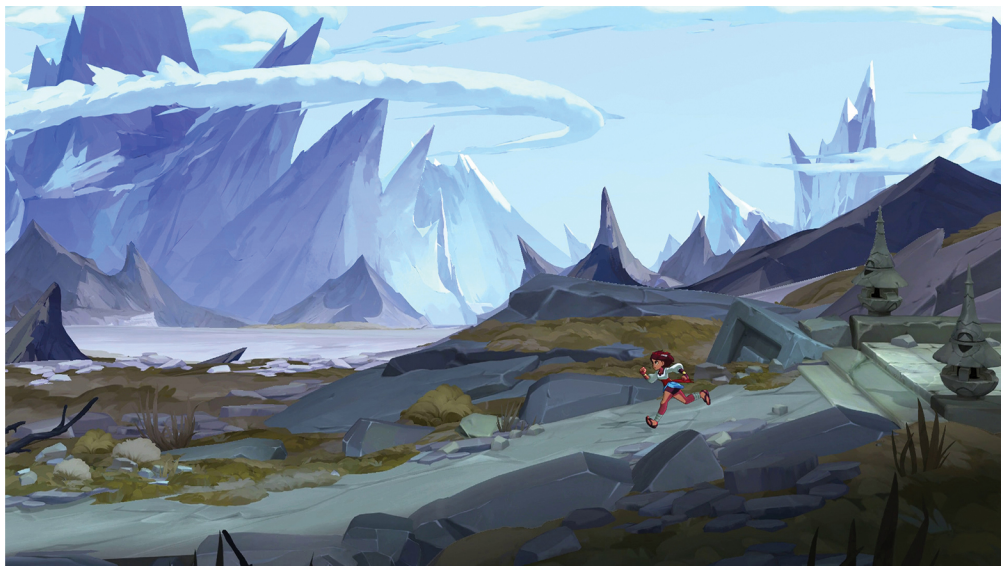
As much humanity as your squad exudes, I wish some of that had rubbed off onto the NPCs of the various towns. Not only do the townspeople's character portraits seem glaringly off compared to those of Ajna and the Incarnations, their designs often clash with the environment as well — several were designed by backers of Indivisible's Indiegogo campaign, thus explaining this glaring dissonance. Further detracting from any sense of community is the lack of currency, weapons, gear or general inventory systems, thereby forgoing the need for shops. Each encounter with a vendor hawking their second-hand wares or a masseuse inviting you to their parlor is a crushing reminder that the game's art direction and soundscapes are but window dressing on a hollow world.

I can understand where Lab Zero was coming from. They wanted an RPG-lite that trimmed a lot of the fat for the sake of expediency — and for the most part, it works in Indivisible's favor. The game lends itself well to quick play sessions thanks to save stations generously scattered every few steps, while the freedom from item bloat is a godsend to completionists whose need to unearth every minute trinket can lead to needless stress. Also, the overworld platforming challenges scale up very gradually, culminating in an endgame sequence that tests your learned navigation skills with little undue punishment for failure.

But all this streamlining comes at the cost of a richer environment and deeper systems that would keep hardcore players invested well beyond the game's typical runtime. There is a massive stable of characters, each as fun to direct in battle as they are to engage in conversation, yet limited in the amount of focus and attention they deserve. The Smash Bros.-esque combat is pulse-pounding and dynamic up until the moment you "crack the code" and settle on the same plan of attack for the remainder of the quest. And while the environment is extremely lush and inspired, most of that creativity doesn't extend below the surface. (Also, sound effect volume during cutscenes is turned down so low that the on-screen action loses all intended impact. What happened in the mixing studio?)

None of this results in a bad game, though! Despite the disappointments that arose, the adventure is entertaining enough that I gladly marched onward. It does feel as though Lab Zero had a grander vision for the end product, but had to scale back significantly either due to financial difficulties or development inexperience within the genre.

It may be far from perfect, but with fluid animations, strong vocal performances and a cultural variety that most contemporary games regrettably lack, Indivisible is most certainly worthy of our attention. **— TONY**



8.0

Too Ambitious for Switch

THE OUTER WORLDS

WITH EARTH EXPERIENCING a period of turbulence at the moment, it might be tempting to blast off into space in search of greener pastures. If you're looking for escapism, beware: The Outer Worlds is eager to remind you that if humanity ever makes a new home among the stars, we'll bring most of our biggest problems with us.

An incredibly well-written sci-fi western, The Outer Worlds is one of the best role-playing games to ever grace a Nintendo platform. Unfortunately, it does suffer from one major flaw: It is utterly, excruciatingly hideous.

Porting a big, complex RPG to the Switch always involves compromise. In most cases, a loss of graphical fidelity is a price worth paying for portability, but not so with The Outer Worlds. The game has been stripped back and optimized to such a degree that it's nigh unplayable.

This port is certainly ambitious. Detailed HD textures have been swapped out for low-res equivalents. The game's draw distance is limited. Everything more than a few feet away blurs into an abstract mess. Not only does this risk giving the player a headache, it also compromises the gameplay. The Outer Worlds may be an RPG, but it's also a first-person shooter. You can't shoot what you can't see.

The glaring graphical flaws are likely to turn many players away, which is a real shame — because anyone who endures and fights through the horrendous presentation is bound to fall in love with the sprawling, epic narrative. As the captain of a spaceship, you and your ragtag crew are on a mission to save a colony ship from certain doom.

The world of The Outer Worlds is both horrifying and hilarious. The game pivots deftly from quirky humor to subtle horror, and it's hard not to fall in love with the retro-futuristic rustic setting. Every character sparkles with wit and charm; every sidequest has multiple solutions to suit your preferred playstyle. You'll find yourself falling in love with the world and its inhabitants, even as you struggle to make sense of every part of the environment.

If you're eager to keep politics out of gaming, this might not be the game you're looking for. In lieu of an evil empire, The Outer Worlds has a board of evil corporations, desperate to enslave humanity for their own profit. The game is not shy about editorializing — as in many RPGs, the player has the freedom to make choices that impact the world around them, and in this case, it's made very clear that siding with the corporations is morally wrong.

What makes The Outer Worlds stand out, though, is the level of nuance that's brought to these choices. Many of the corporate peons you meet throughout your journey are imbued with a degree of pathos, from the company man who sacrifices his life to save others to the literally faceless store employee who sends care packages to his mother.

While the game pushes you to rage against the corporate machine, you're constantly reminded that doing so has a cost. You might be slightly inconveniencing your enemies by rerouting power away from their factories, but you'll also be ruining the lives of the many low-level employees that rely on the factory to make ends meet.

Thus, it's up to the player to make the difficult decision: Is long-term social change worth the damage it causes along the way? There's no denying that this game's message is incredibly timely. It's just a shame that it's so painfully ugly.

The Outer Worlds is a must-play for fans of choice-driven sci-fi roleplaying games. That said, it's hard to recommend the Switch port, as you won't be able to shake the feeling that you're playing an inferior version of a game that really deserves better.

— MATTHEW L.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: PRIVATE DIVISION
DEVELOPERS: OBSIDIAN ENT. & VIRTUOS RATING: M

SWITCH PUBLISHER: TEAM17
DEVELOPER: SMG STUDIO
RATING: E

8.0

Fun with Furniture

MOVING OUT

CALVIN KEEPS SUGGESTING that we should move. My parents moved to a new house not too long ago. My brother and his family moved not too long before that. In Calvin's mind, it's an adventure! Going to a new place! Living in an all-new home!

. . . The kid has no idea just how much work it is.

Moving is not fun. Having to pack up all of your belongings, trying to maintain some measure of organization all throughout the process, physically lifting box after box, carry them all to whatever vehicle you've paid too much money for to rent for the day and then do it all over again, a second time, in reverse . . . well. He'll learn the truth of its frustration some day.

I may have done a further disservice to his young mind in this area, actually, since coming hot on the heels of his purely positive perspective of our relatives' recent moves is Moving Out, the video game that makes moving seem fun — and I've let him watch and laugh along at its antics. Surely now his future move to college will include broken windows, smashed TVs and carelessly hurled heirlooms and he'll wonder why no one else is chuckling too.

Moving Out is another physics-fueled property damage simulator like Good Job! (reviewed earlier in this issue). Unlike that game, though, you aren't penalized for trashing the homes into which you've been sent to retrieve furniture here — you're often encouraged to smash it up!

That's a good thing, as it lays a foundation for fun here: You have to move a selection of highlighted items into a waiting truck in a limited time, but you can do so as recklessly as you please. Crash through the living room window to give yourself a more direct route. Throw the family's cherished fine china across the yard to save a few seconds. It's fine!

. . . Well, most of the time. There are some consequences. Items like fine china will break if handled too roughly, then respawn back in their original position, forcing you to start from scratch again. Other items are too bulky or oddly shaped to move easily — L-shaped couches and king-sized beds are a chore. Really, Moving Out starts off simply and gives you a good first impression, but then it hits you with frustrating gameplay situations that strike a little too close to the actual un-fun reality of actually moving.

At one point, fairly early in the main campaign, I got perturbed to the point that I was ready to be done with the game entirely — there were too many too-heavy objects to handle, there wasn't enough time on the countdown clock to move them all and bringing in a Player 2 to share the load actually made things *more* difficult by causing large objects to weigh even more, forcing both players to carry them together. Thankfully, though, I gave the game another go and turned to the included Assist Mode. It has checkbox on/off options to address every one of those frustrations and more, and activating the assistance in all of those areas made the whole game so much more fun! Objects got lighter, more time was put on the clock . . . Moving Out with Assist Mode is awesome. Without? Not so much. (If it were up to me, the Assist Mode level of difficulty would be the default, and then skilled players could challenge themselves with the default setting being labeled Hard Mode instead.)

If you put in some time, activate Assist Mode and bring in a few friends to fill out a multiplayer team of up to four simultaneous employees, you can have a ton of fun playing Moving Out. Much more fun than actually moving, I'm sure you'd all agree. **— LUCAS**

Back to Xenoblade's Past

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES: DEFINITIVE EDITION

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: MONOLITH SOFT
RATING: T

IT FEELS LIKE coming home again.

I've played Xenoblade Chronicles before, on all three past platforms. I was there for the fan campaign that successfully brought it to the Wii in North America — I played it once immediately after its launch on disc, then again after Shulk was revealed to be joining the Smash roster. I was there again when it was ported to the New Nintendo 3DS, enduring its downgrade in visuals to experience its story and setting once more. I didn't buy it a third time when it came to the Wii U via digital download (since I still had the Wii disc, and that worked perfectly well on Wii U too), but I appreciated that a new audience was getting a chance to step into this world.

And now a fourth opportunity has arrived. The brand-new Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition has brought the Bionis back to life again on the Switch, and for me, exploring it once again feels like coming back home.

What I didn't expect, though, was just how similar some aspects of this release would be to the versions that preceded it. Nintendo's announcement of this game was a little bit vague in explaining just which parts of it had been touched up for 2020, and which were still firmly rooted in the past. To dispel any remaining doubt, this is very much still a Wii game at heart — it's not a full remaster or reimagining that has totally altered the original.

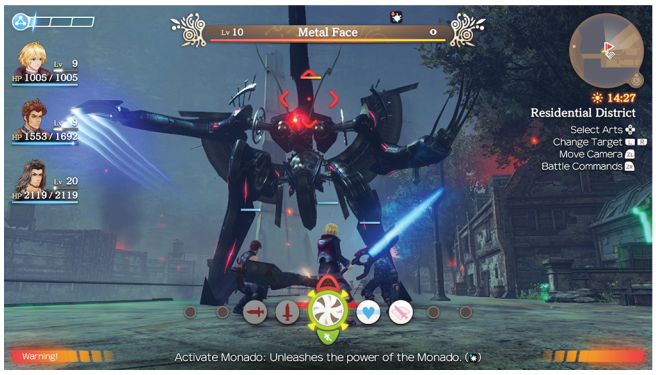
The geometry of the environment is the surefire sign that this game was first developed for a platform with less power. You'll see things like low-poly rocks and trees. Sharp, straight-edged shorelines on beaches that look unnatural. Blades of grass rendered as 2D textures that clip straight through the 3D models of characters in cutscenes. It's no big deal, but it does make the visual presentation less cohesive than past versions' since other elements of the graphics have been upgraded. The playable characters and major NPCs have all had their models totally overhauled, for instance, and they look great! But also a bit incongruous with their surroundings from time to time. Like a 16-bit Mario in an 8-bit game.

Once I got used to the cross-fusion of two different visual eras, though, I settled in and truly began to appreciate all the new bells and whistles that inarguably improve upon the features of the Wii original. For example, the user interface in battle has been totally revamped with new, helpful visual prompts. Combat can be chaotic in Xenoblade games, and icons that help cut through the graphical noise are a godsend.

Take Shulk's various sword-wielding Arts. He can earn bonuses by positioning himself to the side or the rear of an enemy before activating many of them (like the infamous "Back Slash!"). In older versions you just had to line him up as best you could and hope you got the angle right. Here on Switch, an exclamation point pops up alongside the word "Chance!" to let you know you're in the right spot at the right time and can score a perfect hit if you hit the A Button right then.

Outside of combat sequences, more new U.I. upgrades help streamline the hundreds of different sidequests you'll come across, with more exclamation points pointing out the locations of collectables and enemy types that NPCs will ask you to hunt down. And because some areas of this vast world can sometimes seem a little too vast and confusing when you're unsure of where to head to next to advance the primary story, a new GPS-esque line of yellow dots on the mini-map will keep you from losing your way.

And if you don't want your hand to be held? All those features can be turned off. I've found them to be beneficial myself, as even though I've been to the Bionis so many times before, I swear there are whole areas I've never previously explored! I'm seeing things I've never seen before.



And on that note, let's talk about the new Xenoblade Chronicles: Future Connected. The base Xenoblade game is already a massive adventure that could very well take you over 100 hours, but to supplement that content even further, the Definitive Edition also includes a brand-new epilogue scenario that stars Shulk and Melia teaming up again and traveling to the Bionis' Shoulder — an area originally intended to be included in the core game, but which was left on the cutting room floor at some late point in development, years ago.

I'm not there yet.

As I mentioned in our last issue, I'm saving the Future Connected story as a reward for myself, to encourage me to legitimately play the main game from start to finish once and for all. That's probably unhelpful to any of you who want to read NF's critical analysis of the new content there right away, but I'm asking for your patience out of respect for this venerable masterpiece of a video game. I'm having too much fun soaking in the comfort of being back in the company of these characters and seeing their world with greater clarity than ever before — it would be doing them a great disservice to rush through just to be able to put a number on this review.

For now, please know that this all-new edition of a truly magical game has retained nearly all of its old majesty in the transition to more modern hardware, and it's now more accessible than ever before — both through its U.I. improvements and the fact that it's not held back from finding the audience it deserves by a low print run (Wii), being restricted to a particular model of portable (New Nintendo 3DS) or being sent into the eShop of a system with a painfully small install base (Wii U). Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition is the new, best version of an incredible game, finally made widely available with the full support of its publisher that it has deserved for over a decade. Buy it! Play it. Enjoy your own adventure across the body of the Bionis, and learn for yourself why this game has become such a cult classic. Come on home. **— LUCAS**

IN PROGRESS

SHULK'S SQUAD

HEROES OF THE BIONIS

While Shulk and the Monado are absolutely the central stars of this show, the entire cast is equally engaging. The whole gang participates in the overall story, as you pick up party members one at a time as you move the plot along. But only three of them are active in battles at any given time, so you're afforded a lot of flexibility in how you assemble your preferred fighting squad. It helps with replay value, too! Though I've played this game several times before, I'm using different trios of heroes this time around, and that's giving me a fresh understanding of the deep versatility Monolith Soft baked into the battle system.

REVIEW CONTINUED FROM ISSUE #46

Reimagined for the Present

TRIALS OF MANA

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

IT TOOK ME around 40 hours to fully complete one playthrough of Trials of Mana, and as there are six characters and different endings for each, the game can be considered around an 80-hour affair. I tend to measure my RPGs more on overall experience rather than an hour count, but that metric seems to be important to many.

I'd say the first 10 hours were a lot more fun and interesting than the 30 that followed, but the last 10 had their merits as well. Experimenting with each character and building a party to run through the game with is important, and can be difficult, as there's no one character who is balanced enough to really stand alone. I'd forgo any healing spells though — the game provides ample healing items — which means it's safe to skip selecting Charlotte. I covered the characters extensively in our last issue, but suffice it to say that Kevin, Angela and Charlotte all have annoying character traits, whereas Duran, Riesz and Hawkeye are more tolerable. More info is given for class changes, which is nice, and the ??? Seeds needed to do the later class changes are more prolific than in the 16-bit original.

The best equipment can also be found via Seeds, and help from finding Li'l Cactus can mean getting better items, but I was still getting Candies from Rainbow Seeds occasionally even late in the game, so that aspect was a bit tedious (but still not as annoying as in the original game).

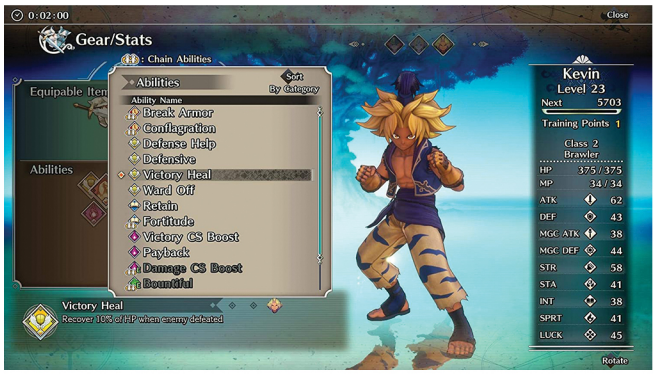
The one thing that was the starkest contrast between the original Super Famicom game and this version is the lack of any need to grind. They revamped the experience model in order to give more experience per battle, and even bonus experience for meeting requirements like finishing a battle within a certain time frame or performing certain actions. There were only a few instances when I felt I needed to level up before a big boss battle, and even then it was a short endeavor. I found that if I simply battled the enemies that I encountered and did not escape the battle, the experience gained was sufficient to not to interrupt the flow of the game. It's a pretty simple plot, but I remember having to dedicate large sections of my play time to grinding before attempting certain areas in the original game, and I lost sight of the big players in each scenario.

The game does a lot of hand-holding: a star appears above each place you need to go or person you need to talk to, HP fillers are around every corner and more often than not you feel overpowered in battle. The difficulty can be changed, but it seemed that Hard difficulty only gave enemies more HP and nerfed your attack slightly, which made the game feel more like busy work (but did make me more thankful for all of those healing items).

The plot of the game puts you squarely behind the 8-ball no matter who you choose. Every action you believe to be righteous somehow plays right into the hands of the villains, and that felt stale. I didn't expect them to make large plot revisions, so the game suffers somewhat from the original's lack of imaginative narrative. It also bounces around a lot more. In Secret of Mana you spent a lot of time in each elemental's areas, and you had to prove yourself to each one by accomplishing various tasks. In this one you go somewhere, beat a boss, find the elemental. Rinse and repeat. Then you return when battling the Benevedons, which feels even more choppy and not unlike a boss rush.

Luckily, the entire game's visuals, while lacking a certain polish and having a few issues with framerate, are gorgeous, true to the original art and fun to explore. The detailed map the game supplies felt like cheating at times, but it was still rewarding to find treasure chests and other goodies and it limited wandering aimlessly.

Combat is just a joy in this game. It gets somewhat monotonous toward the end, and I do wish that the game offered more combos. Charging your moves and then following up with a great combo can really shatter the



the competition. Each new enemy also offered a new strategy puzzle, but most ended up being punching bags. The character design is very fun for each enemy, and while few but the bosses looked intimidating, that is part of the charm of the game.

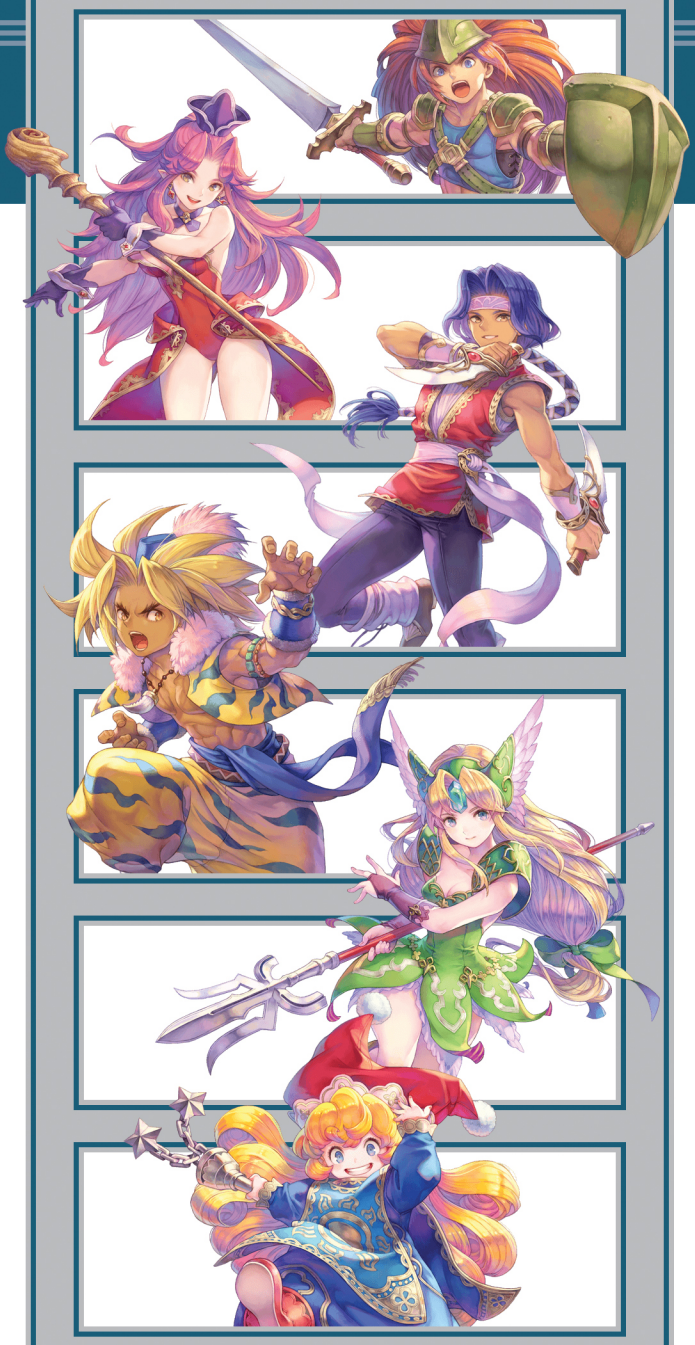
I also found being able to switch characters in battle or control them from my chosen character quickly intuitive and well-built, and I especially enjoyed being given the chance to dodge magic. A lot of the challenge (and frustration) in the original came from not being able to avoid spells without casting certain counterspells that were often expensive in MP. With the large number of enemies that cast spells, that wasn't feasible, and you had to be conservative — whereas in this game you just need quick reflexes. There are still a few bosses that have cheap shots and massive generally unavoidable spells, but most can be overcome with practice or leveling. Skippable cutscenes helped with retrying.

The camera was the biggest enemy, especially in tight spaces, but the A.I., while better than the original, still used up items and magic more than I would have liked. And at odd times, like very close to the end of a battle!

Nearly everything I said about difficulty can be thrown out after you beat the game, as there are brand-new additional post-game elements like a fourth class to attain and other baddies to take on. Anise's Stockade is a surprising addition to the quest, and really made this version of the game complete. I won't spoil it further than saying New Game Plus can be earned!

This is one of the most interesting remasters I've ever played, largely stemming from the perspective shift and the love given to the original. They did a great job of keeping true while also adding value. This is leagues above the effort produced for the Secret of Mana remake. I hope this starts a trend for how to handle beloved 2D RPGs from the '80s and '90s, as I think many more could benefit from modernization and the features now available from many more years of industry maturity and development experience. **— BRETT**

8.5



CHOOSE YOUR OWN PARTY
ANY THREE WILL DO

We've hit this highlight again and again, but it bears repeating one last time that Trials of Mana offers great potential for variety and replay value due to the fact that you're able to freely choose which three of the available six different party members you'll take with you on your journey through the game. Six may not seem like a large number of heroes, but let's do the math! With six possible recruits, you can create a total of 20 different combinations. (Calculate it yourself! It's true!)

What's more, within those 20 possible groups, any of the three chosen heroes can be your primary protagonist, offering a somewhat different experience in each case. And what's even more, the variety offered by the game's class change system means that even the same group of three who set off to save the world together at the beginning of the journey can end up diverging into dozens of different configurations by the end, gameplay-wise.

Taken together, all that means that your experience playing Trials of Mana is almost surely going to be totally unique from anyone else's. Your decisions drive the adventure! And that helps set it apart from the vast majority of other JRPGs on the market — many of which also offer character and party customization, but not to this degree.

A Glimpse of the Future

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

PS4 PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, wait. Wait just a minute. What is this? Is this seriously a review of a PlayStation 4 game in *Nintendo* Force Magazine?

Well, yes.

Listen, I've already admitted in these pages in the past that I sometimes venture outside the bounds of Nintendo's territory. I borrowed my brother's PS4 to play Persona 5 when Joker was announced for Smash, wanting to get a head start on that adventure since it was surely going to get a Switch port soon thereafter. (Not so much.) But Dan upgraded to a PS4 Pro and kindly let me keep his old base model, and soon after that Square Enix unveiled the release date for this highly anticipated remake of 1997's PS1 opus Final Fantasy VII, and I *accidentally* preordered it instantly.

It's research for the future! Persona 5 may or may not ever materialize in playable form on the Switch, but I'd bet a hefty chunk of gil that Final Fantasy VII Remake will end up on a Nintendo console eventually. Maybe not the Switch, but perhaps the "Pro" revision of the system that's been rumored for so long, or whatever the next-generation Nintendo machine is after the sun has set on this one. Two reasons. One, Square and Nintendo are back to being buddies again after years of fallout (that began in the '90s with, well, Final Fantasy VII). And two, this Remake only remakes the first portion of that original game. It'll be years before Part 2 (and probably Part 3), so by the time we get to the finale of this retold version of Cloud Strife's story, Nintendo's hardware will have probably caught up enough to at least be able to handle this debut chapter.

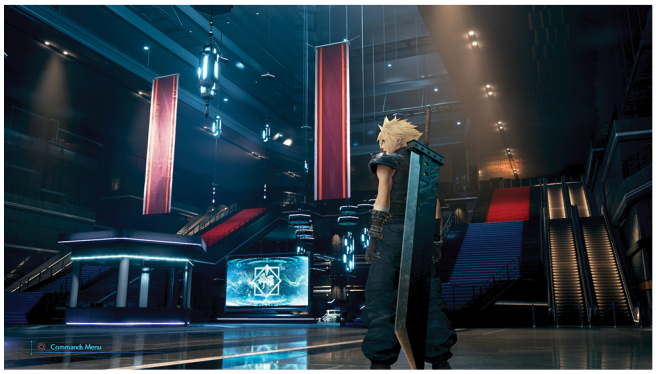
If you're unfamiliar with Final Fantasy VII, you're not alone! I myself never played the original game, having stood firmly alongside the Big N in the console wars of the '90s and ignored its PS1 release. But missing out on it has pained me for over two decades! Final Fantasy III (a.k.a. VI) on the SNES had been one of my absolute favorites of the 16-bit era, and I can't believe I never broke down to play its follow-up – even as it amassed such a massive fan following of its own. Still, I'm now thankful for my 20+ years of neglect for this tale, because it allowed me to go into this adventure mostly blind. I've only ever known the broad strokes of this story. Most of my familiarity with Cloud came from Smash.

Here, I can understand why he became such an icon. It feels incredible to wield an obscenely massive sword in battle – and much moreso in this remake, which swaps in direct action combat for the old turn-based, menu-driven battles of the original.

The battles here are an absolute joy. You surge into the fray swinging the gigantic Buster Sword and carve through foes left and right, and all the while your "ATB" gauge slowly fills up. When a charge of ATB is ready, you can open the Commands Menu – when you do that, the action around you instantly slows to a crawl so that you can navigate the menu and select an ability to unleash, a spell to cast or an item to use. It's a spectacular idea, and it's executed beautifully – all the complexity and wealth of options are still there, but fights remain frantic and intense all the same.

What's more, Cloud's not alone – you also get to play as the gun-armed Barret, the martial arts master Tifa and the magic-slinging mage Aerith, and you can switch between active fighters with just a tap of the D-Pad. The camera immediately recenters itself behind your newly selected playable fighter and the battle continues, never missing a beat. Combat begins simply in the early hours, but ends up becoming a gloriously chaotic dance between all the characters and their dozens of unique abilities, all of which you get to decide on through choices you make about which weapons to equip and which Materia to slot into those weapons.

. . . I could sing the praises of the battles for days, but I need to move on! There's so much more to discuss!



Visually, the game is superb. Every environment is gorgeous, every character a triumph. The effects are so insanely flashy it's mind-boggling, and the cutscenes are film-quality fare. The only hiccup is a technical shortcoming that keeps some textures from being drawn in properly — you'll be exploring the exquisitely detailed city of Midgar, then, out of nowhere, some abysmally low-res texture will appear on a door or wall and break your sense of immersion. (It's probably something that can be patched. It'll surely be fixed before the game comes to the Nintendo Super Switch.)

On the audio side of things, every character's voice acting is perfect, and the soundtrack is sublime. And as I said before, I have no real nostalgia for these songs — people who played the 1997 version back in 1997 and are now hearing these brand-new orchestrations here in 2020 must be crying from pure joy at their quality.

Am I overselling this? Do I need to turn in my Nintendo Loyalist membership card? Perhaps. But there's a reason that this and Persona 5 are the only PlayStation games I've paid any attention to in the last decade or so. I wasn't going to play this if I didn't know going in that it would be great. My Non-tendo time is very limited. But I do honestly believe that this game will come to a Nintendo system in the future, and when that time comes and we're running previews for "Final Fantasy VII Remake, the Nintendo version" in some far-off NF edition, I want to be able to point back to this moment in time, right when it was first brand-new in its first iteration, and have a record of my opinion set in ink. This is a time capsule. In fact:

Hello, readers from the future! Thanks for coming back to read this 47th issue of NF after future me recommended you do so. Hope everything's going well for you in whatever year you're in now! Hey, remember when COVID-19 was just starting? That was crazy, wasn't it? Anyhow, Final Fantasy VII Remake was awesome back in 2020, and I'm so excited it's finally coming to a Nintendo console!

. . . And if it never does? Well, this has at least been a permanent record of my hope for that future. **— LUCAS**

9.7

THE FIRST RECRUITS
ASSEMBLING AVALANCHE

While the original Final Fantasy VII featured a larger cast of playable characters, this remake's focus on adapting just the first part of that PS1 classic means you only get to meet and control the first few. Luckily, each one handles totally differently, and there's a lot of depth here despite the seemingly small roster.

Cloud Strife kicks off the adventure, of course, and serves as the character who is directly controlled outside of battle for most its 40-hour runtime. In battle, he deftly sends the big blade of his Buster Sword slashing through foes with ease, then supplements his melee combat abilities with spellcasting when he needs to keep his distance. His unique battle functionality is an ability to switch between two modes (or stances) — one is slower but more powerful, while the other is faster and better suited to crowd control against multiple foes.

Barret joins up in the opening adventure, but despite his muscular build, he's not a close-range bruiser — his gun arm makes him the team's ranged attack specialist. His unique ability, Overcharge, builds up a super-powerful shot over time. Fire it off and it'll charge up again.

Fisticuffs are Tifa's preferred form of fighting, as she's the one to always dash in, get in close and pound enemies to oblivion with brutal punches. Her Whirling Uppercut is always at the ready as a free attack for extra damage, and she learns a whole range of other over-the-top and wildly acrobatic martials arts skills as well.

Aerith is the fourth and final playable character. The team's healer first and foremost, she slings spells from her staff and keeps her allies' HP topped off better than anyone else. She's not without offensive options, though, as she can unleash a Tempest of stored-up magical might when you hold down the Triangle Button.

Lastly, there's Red XIII! But, sadly, he isn't playable. He joins the party late in the story, so he's only an A.I.-directed ally in battle. But that will surely change when Part 2 arrives . . . years from now! Ugh!

United We Stand

THE WONDERFUL 101: REMASTERED

WITH THE Wii U under full-on "no one wants one" attacks from bloggers and consumers alike, the original 2013 launch of The Wonderful 101 was strained from the start. Just like the Franken-console it called home at the time, this groundbreaking Nintendo-published, Platinum-developed game felt like an amalgamation of everything both storied studios did best. Sometimes that meant being like chocolate and peanut butter, though other times, it was more like a kitten holding a chainsaw. You can see how it might be difficult for a game in this rainbow-blended genre to clearly communicate to potential players what it really was. That's another reason why the game struggled at first — but now that it's had seven years to marinate in the collective consciousness of the Nintendo fandom, I think its day may have finally come.

Before you sign up, though, you should know that The Wonderful 101 is a string of delightful paradoxes from beginning to end. Starring the superheroes Wonder Red, Wonder Blue and a host of others, the game's story is both wholly original and riddled with tropes, lighthearted and ridiculous at one moment, sexually suggestive and even tearjerkingly sad the next.

Most of these pint-sized Wonderful Ones look like muscular children (and in fact, that's exactly what a few of them are), though their fully-voiced theme song (an athletic, five-minute-long orchestral masterpiece called The Won-Stoppable 101) is sung by one of the huskiest male choruses in the history of games featuring male choruses.

As the name implies, there are more than 100 members of this Wonderful team (closer to 120, actually), each intricately designed in exquisite detail — but you won't actually see most of those details when playing the game. The camera is zoomed way out almost all the time, which is the only way to fit your entire team on-screen simultaneously.

This mob is both your lifeblood and your weapon of choice. You can slam them directly into foes or transform them into various weapons like fists, swords, guns, Jell-O, whips, claws, drills and even tombstones. There are over 20 of these "Unite Morphs" in all, with primary morphs being activated by drawing a specific shape with either the right analog stick or with your finger on the touchpad. The more members of your group you have at any time, the larger you can make your morphs — though if too many of your group is knocked down by an enemy, you won't be able to do squat. You'll spend the majority of your time here fighting, drawing morphs, recruiting new teammates (including some bad guys), solving action-based puzzles, dabbling in wonky platforming and old-school shoot-'em-up sections and discovering tons of secrets along the way.

Though the game may look small, it's actually still Platinum's largest to date, taking most players upwards of 25 hours to clear the first time through. The game doesn't stop introducing new ideas and Unite Morphs to you until the very last stage. Then, after the credits roll, there are loads of techniques to master and bonuses to find, including Platinum's unofficial mascot Bayonetta as an unlockable character.

This enhanced Switch port cuts you off from the touchscreen when docked (for obvious reasons), but in Handheld Mode, it has even more touch features than the original. You can draw your character morphs right on the playable area now, and changing the size and transparency of the second screen is just as breezy. It's not quite the same as it was on the Wii U — where you had the unique experience of looking up at your TV then down at your GamePad screen in tandem to essentially play two games at once — but it comes awfully close. On the plus side, the framerate is way better now, especially when you enter those mandatory second screen areas, and everything just feels generally more user-friendly. Also new for this port is the option to play the game with "auto-attack" on. This allows folks of any skill level to get through the bulk of the game . . . though it also defuses any potential for skill-building, so I'd save it for a last resort.

In an interview for NF #45, The Wonderful 101's director, Hideki Kamiya, told me that he didn't intentionally make this game about him — and yet he appears here as a secret playable character, code-named Wonder Director! It really feels like this is his life's work, so it makes sense that underneath the surface-level trappings, it's really about his career and his life. In order to master the game, you must respect the individual powers of a giant team while bringing them together to become something greater than the sum of their parts. That's what Director Kamiya-san does best, and in The Wonderful 101, it's up to you to do the same.

By the way, try saying "Wii U under full-on no one" five times fast for a fun little surprise. I "wonder" if that was intentional? **— JONATHAN**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: PLATINUMGAMES RATING: T

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the past two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files	8.5	Tony	#44
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	9.0	Rebecca	#46
Astral Chain	8.5	Jonathan	#42
Blade Strangers	7.0	Jonathan	#36
BurgerTime Party!	8.0	Lucas	#44
Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker	7.5	Neal	#35
Contra: Rogue Corps	7.0	David	#43
Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy	7.5	David	#35
Crash Team Racing: Nitro-Fueled	8.0	David	#41
Crystal Crisis	9.0	Jonathan	#40
Daemon X Machina	7.0	Chris	#42
Dark Souls: Remastered	8.0	Chris	#37
Diablo III: Eternal Collection	9.0	Nadia	#37
Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth – Complete Edition	8.5	Josh	#44
Dragon Ball FighterZ	8.0	Tony	#36
Dragon Quest Builders 2	9.0	Shesez	#41
Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age – Definitive Edition	9.5	Lucas	#43
Dreamworks Dragons: Dawn of New Riders	7.5	David	#39
Fire Emblem: Three Houses	9.5	Lucas	#41
Fitness Boxing	5.5	Chris	#38
Friday the 13th: The Game – Ultimate Slasher Edition	8.0	Kevin C.	#46
Ghostbusters: The Video Game Remastered	7.5	Brett	#43
Guacamelee! One-Two Punch Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#42
Heroland	7.0	Rebecca	#45
Ice Age: Scrat's Nutty Adventure!	5.0	Chris	#45
Katamari Damacy REROLL	9.5	Tony	#38
Langrisser I & II	8.5	David	#46
Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy – Deluxe Edition	8.5	Brett	#45
LEGO DC Super-Villains	8.0	Thor	#38
Little Dragons Café	7.0	Rebecca	#36
Luigi's Mansion 3	9.0	Chris	#44
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games: Tokyo 2020	8.5	David	#44
Mario Tennis Aces	6.5	Lucas	#35
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order	7.0	Brett	#41
Mega Man 11	11/13	David	#36
Mega Man X Legacy Collection	9.5	Jonathan	#35
Mega Man X Legacy Collection 2	7.0	Jonathan	#35
Mega Man Zero/ZX Legacy Collection	9.0	David	#45
Model Debut #nicola	7.0	Rebecca	#44
Monster Boy and the Cursed Kingdom	8.5	David	#38
Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate	7.5	Kevin K.	#37
Moonlighter	8.0	Lucas	#39
My Time at Portia	5.5	Chris	#40
Namco Museum Arcade Pac	7.0	Brett	#38
New Super Lucky's Tale	9.0	David	#44
New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe	8.0	Lucas	#38
Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	9.0	Brett	#43
Nickelodeon Kart Racers	5.0	David	#37
Nintendo Labo Vehicle Kit	8.5	Lucas	#36
Nintendo Labo VR Kit	9.0	Lucas	#40
Octopath Traveler	8.5	Brett	#35
Overcooked! 2	7.0	Brett	#35
Paw Patrol: On a Roll	8.5	Lucas	#37
Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu! & Let's Go, Eevee!	8.5	Lucas	#37
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX	8.0	Lucas	#46
Pokémon Shield	9.0	Thor	#44
Pokémon Sword	8.0	Lucas	#44
Ring Fit Adventure	8.5	Matthew T.	#44
Rune Factory 4 Special	7.5	Rebecca	#46
Scribblenauts Mega Pack	7.5	David	#37
Sega Genesis Classics	8.5	Brett	#38
Shining Resonance Refrain	7.0	Neal	#36
SNK 40th Anniversary Collection	8.5	Thor	#38
Snack World: The Dungeon Crawl – Gold	6.0	Brett	#45
Sonic Mania Plus	9.0	Tony	#35
Spyro Reignited Trilogy	9.0	David	#42
Star Wars Pinball	9.0	Lucas	#42
Starlink: Battle for Atlas	8.5	David	#37
Super Dragon Ball Heroes: World Mission	6.0	Tony	#40
Super Mario Maker 2	10	Tony	#41
Super Mario Party	9.0	Lucas	#36
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	7.5	David	#44
Super Smash Bros. Ultimate	10	Lucas	#37
Team Sonic Racing	8.5	David	#41
The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening	9.5	Jonathan	#43
The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors	7.0	Jonathan	#44
The Nintendo Switch Lite	9.0	Matthew L.	#43
The Sega Genesis Mini	9.0	David	#43
The World Ends With You: Final Remix	6.5	Rebecca	#37
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE Encore	7.5	Matthew L.	#46
Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes	8.0	Jonathan	#38
Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince	9.0	Lucas	#44
Valkyria Chronicles 4	8.5	Neal	#36
Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus	8.5	Neal	#35
Wolfenstein: Youngblood	7.0	Chris	#41
Xenoblade Chronicles 2: Torna ~ The Golden Country	8.5	Kevin K.	#36
Yonder: The Cloud Catcher Chronicles	7.0	Neal	#35
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	9.0	Tony	#43
Yoshi's Crafted World	7.5	Lucas	#39
Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of DANA	9.5	Lucas	#36

3DS

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Etrian Odyssey Nexus	8.5	Nadia	#39
Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn	7.5	Neal	#39
Luigi's Mansion	8.0	Neal	#36
Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story + Bowser Jr.'s Journey	9.0	Neal	#38
Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth	8.0	Matthew L.	#40
WarioWare Gold	8.5	Thor	#35
Yo-kai Watch 3	8.5	Lucas	#39
Yo-kai Watch Blasters: Red Cat Corps & White Dog Squad	6.5	Lucas	#37

REVIEW REMINDER
MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES: TOKYO 2020

THOUGH DAVID'S REVIEW of this latest sequel in the Mario & Sonic series appeared only three issues ago, the world has changed so drastically in just the past few months that the Olympic Games event on which it was based is now no longer planned to take place! Not here in 2020, at least, as Tokyo's Summer Olympics have been officially postponed to next summer, with a new opening date set: July 23, 2021. The ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic is to blame, of course – it simply wouldn't be safe for the Games to go on as originally scheduled. We can only hope that the situation will have improved by this time next year, as being able to hold the Olympics without fear of the virus would certainly be cause for worldwide celebration.

In the meanwhile, we're left with what is now sure to be an odd curiosity in video game history. The "Tokyo 2020" Games are not and will never happen, so Sonic and Mario competing in them is even weirder now than the crossover between Sega and Nintendo's biggest mascot characters ever was! I wonder if they'll relaunch it with an altered "Tokyo 2021" subtitle next year? It might be worth it to grab a copy of the game in its original form to keep purely as a collector's item.

Of course, it's also more than worthwhile even aside from all its sudden historical uniqueness. David praised its story mode, saying he just couldn't put it down. And while Brett was less enthusiastic about the single-player content in his Second Opinion, he did assert its value as a source of good family fun with its variety of multiplayer Olympic events. And hey, if you're bummed about having to wait a whole 'nother year for the real thing, you can at least have your own Olympics now, with Mario and Sonic! **– LUCAS**

WHAT IF?

CUTTING AND PASTING THE PAPER STYLE

Animation experts provide some convincing proofs of concept!

THE ORIGAMI KING brings the Paper Mario series up to six official installments. Maybe it's time Nintendo let a different franchise play around with the paper style? Fan animators agree, and they've given us a glimpse of what that could be like!

First up, the team at 64 Bits has produced a proof of concept for Paper Zelda! Out of all of the Big N's many different brands, The Legend of Zelda has been officially represented by the most varied set of different visual styles. Realistic, cel-shaded, looking like everything's made of plastic toys in a diorama . . . we've seen it all. But not this! 64 Bits' animation applies the Paper Mario look to a dozen different Links, remaking memorable scenes all the way from the NES era to Breath of the Wild 2! It's easy to picture how a Paper Zelda would play, as the series has always had one foot in role-playing territory as it is.

A bit more of a stretch might be Paper Star Fox! JorgeMV crafted a Paper Star Fox 64 trailer to try to help us all visualize that possibility, presenting everything from the side-on view boss battle seen here to on-foot combat between the Star Fox and Star Wolf teams and, of course, a normal behind-the-Arwing flight camera. That last one doesn't work so well, though! It's hard to properly gauge your ship's position as it flies "into" the screen in 3D when the ship itself is a flat piece of 2D paper!

Nintendo may never greenlight any other series getting a paper-styled spin-off, but it's amazing to see the skill these animators have in imagining what they could be like if they did! — **LUCAS**

YouTube.com/64Bits

YouTube.com/JorgePistola

STUDIO UPDATE

EMBER LAB LEVELS UP

And it's all thanks to Majora's Mask!

OVER THREE YEARS ago, back in NF #25, we highlighted an incredible fan-made short film: Terrible Fate, inspired by The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask. Created by a team of professional CGI artists at a studio named Ember Lab, the film was so stunning and detailed that it couldn't *not* go viral, which it did, spreading throughout the video game fandom and beyond. In the time since it first went live, it's racked up over 9,000,000 views on YouTube. And, back in NF #25, I said that I couldn't wait to see what Ember Lab did next.

I didn't expect this! After paying homage to one of the gaming industry's great masterpieces, the Ember team decided to jump directly into game development themselves! They've toiled in secrecy since November 2016, but now their new project, Kena: Bridge of Spirits, has been revealed.

The same skill we saw in Terrible Fate breathes life into this original IP's cutscenes, but it's the playability of this world that is truly impressive! Kena is a spell-slinging, arrow-shooting warrior who bonds with a group of tiny, cuddly forest spirits that seem to follow her commands, à la Pikmin.

The bad news for Nintendo diehards? Kena is currently only confirmed for PC and PlayStation platforms. As with Final Fantasy VII Remake, we'll have to hope that Nintendo tech will catch up to be able to handle it some time in the future! **— LUCAS**

EmberLab.com

FAN-MADE VIDEO EVENT

MOTHER DIRECT

EarthBound fans have grown even more powerful.

"YOU KNOW WHAT, Nintendo!? Fine. We get it. If you're not going to make the thing we want you to make, then we're just going to do it ourselves!"

I can relate. After all, it was that same sentiment that made us want to make this magazine! Nintendo said Nintendo Power would be no more, and we said no to that, and Nintendo Force was born. Disappointment in the modern direction of the Paper Mario series has inspired games like Bug Fables that recapture the essence of the oldest installments. A lack of new F-Zero led to the creation of Shin'en Multimedia's FAST Racing series.

But this? This is on a whole 'nother level!

This past June 13, a huge, talented team of EarthBound fans collectively presented the Mother Direct, a fan-made video event modeled after Nintendo's Direct videos — but even more overflowing with content! A typical Nintendo Direct lasts for, what, 25 minutes or so? But the Mother Direct offered nearly a full hour of reveals, updates and community news for all the Mother faithful out there.

"Mother" is the Japanese name for what American fans know as EarthBound — but I question whether or not I even need to clarify that any more, because this extremely dedicated and diverse community of faithful fans has shouted about this series from the virtual mountaintops of the Internet for so many years on end now that there's almost no way anyone reading this magazine isn't already familiar with their work. But I have to say, I'm amazed all over again. Truly. No other franchise can claim a fanbase as focused and hard-working as Mother can. This Direct just proved it over and over again!

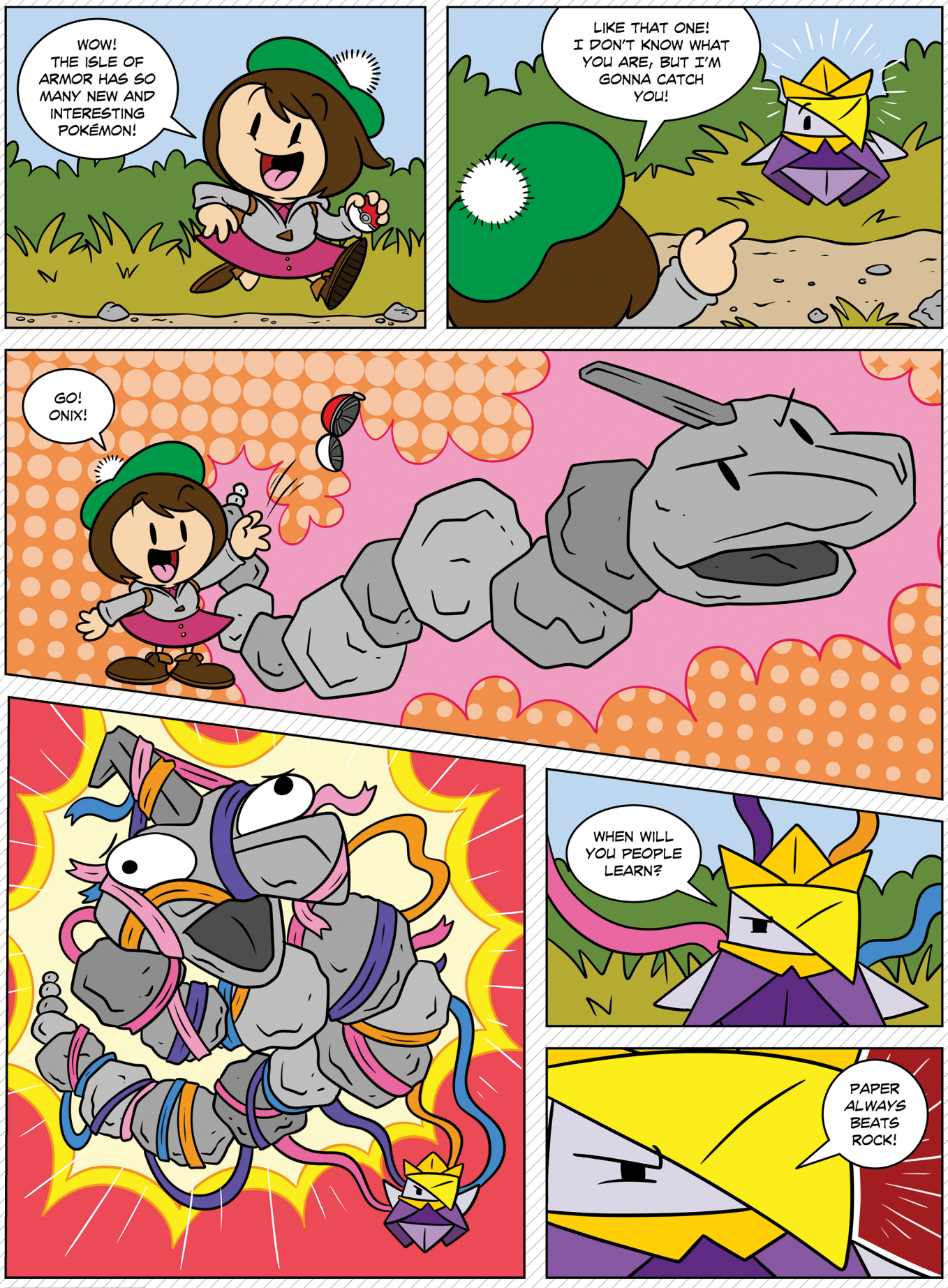
The games! They kept dropping announcements for games one after another after another. EarthBound just turned 25 years old in America — it first hit the SNES in June 1995. And in the quarter-century since, that game and the greater brand surrounding it have inspired so many of its players to tap into their own creativity and craft new worlds that it boggles my mind.

I won't be able to cover everything here, so I encourage you to watch the Mother Direct video yourself on YouTube. But I was thrilled to see so many things included, like the full remake of EarthBound/Mother 2 that is being developed as a PC game called Mother Squared. It's like an even more souped-up Super NES adventure! The first Mother game is also getting a fresh remake called Mother Encore, and new hacking tools and international translations are continuing to keep Mother 3 alive and kicking here in 2020 as well.

Beyond the core Mother trilogy, there's a whole litany of new games in the works that take some piece of inspiration from Shigesato Itoi's foundational tales. Games like Oddventure, Connections and Circadian all adopt the series' signature battle system, but give it their own unique spin. Games like Crystal Story: Awakening and Toasty put players in direct control of their heroes for more a Zelda-esque feel, yet still weave the Mother DNA into their presentations and humor. One title, Mother: Russia, is like a new direct sequel the series never saw! What would happen if Ness lived in Eastern Europe instead of Eagleland? You'll be able to find out, it seems!

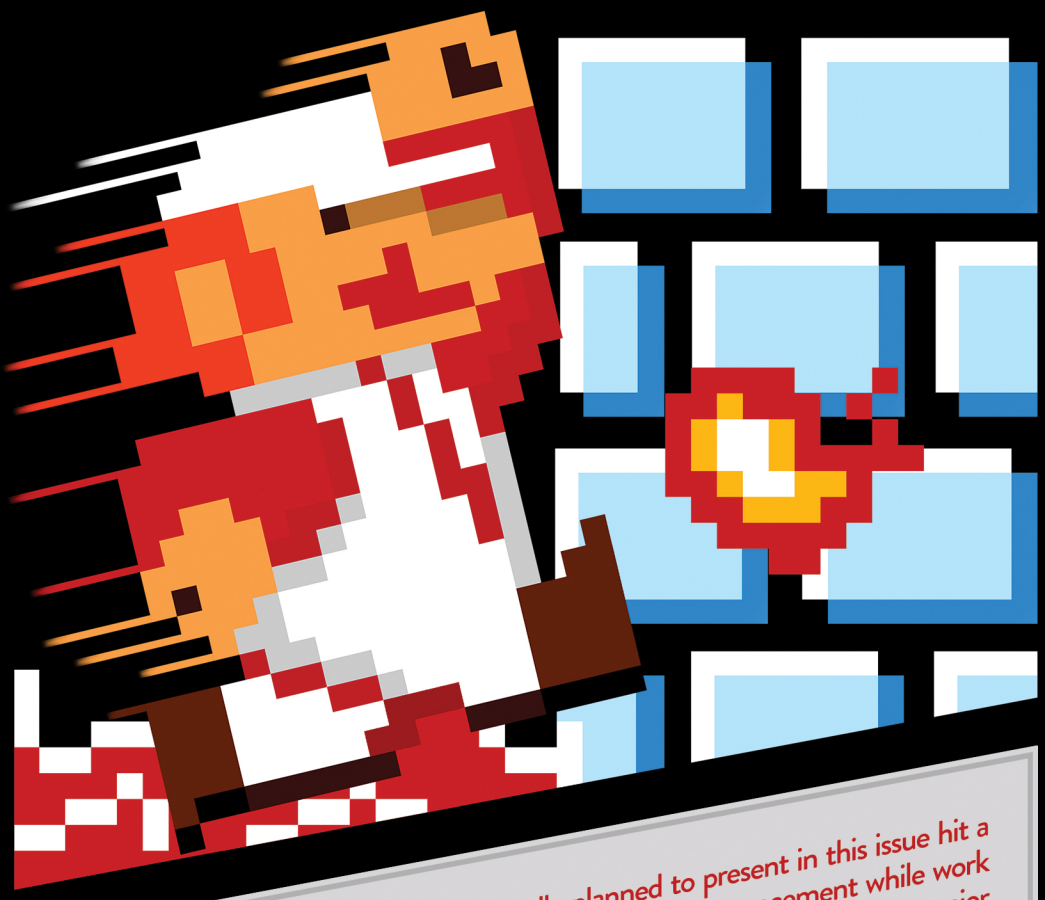
The Mother Direct presented a wild mix of not-for-profit fan games, hopeful future bestsellers on Steam and maybe even a few that could make their way to Nintendo systems in the future. There was no common denominator there — the unifying factor was the love of the Mother series that brought them all together, and the visionaries who came up with the idea to celebrate them all in this great Nintendo Direct-inspired video showcase. Great work, everyone! **— LUCAS**

MotherForever.net



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

NEXT ISSUE



The **Super** Mario celebration we'd originally planned to present in this issue hit a snag when **Paper** Mario cut in with his Origami King announcement while work was already in progress, and convinced us to change directions! But the major Mario milestone we were looking ahead to is still looming just over the horizon: The original **Super Mario Bros.** game turns 35 years old in September! So, come to think of it, it makes more sense for us to celebrate that big birthday in this year's September issue any way. We were just jumping the gun when we thought we'd cover it in July!

So our look back at 35 years of Super Mario Bros. series history is back on the table for next time, Force friends, and we'll also bring you our reviews of the new **LEGO Super Mario** toys and **Paper Mario: The Origami King**. We'll also get caught up on things that didn't quite make the cut this time, like the latest Pokémon news, the conclusion of our review of **Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition**, our full 51-game evaluation of **Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics** and much, much more!

. . . Unless circumstances suddenly change again. This year is weird, you guys.

NF

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #48:

THE HISTORY OF **SUPER MARIO**

PAPER MARIO: THE ORIGAMI KING

NEW POKÉMON SNAP

KINGDOM HEARTS: MELODY OF MEMORY

SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE FIGHTERS PASS VOL. 2

LEGO SUPER MARIO

BEST FRIEND FOREVER

NINJALA

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: BATTLE FOR BIKINI BOTTOM - **REHYDRATED**

SAMURAI JACK: BATTLE THROUGH TIME

STORY OF SEASONS: FRIENDS OF MINERAL TOWN

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES: FUTURE CONNECTED

CLUBHOUSE GAMES: 51 WORLDWIDE CLASSICS

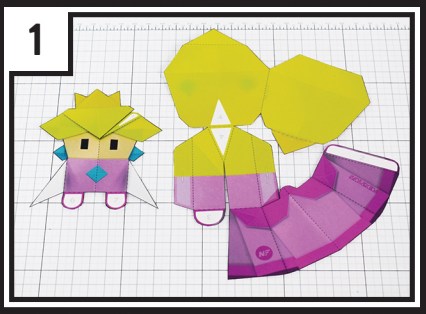
AND MUCH **MORE!**

SEPTEMBER/ OCTOBER 2020

BUILD YOUR OWN ORIGAMI PEACH!

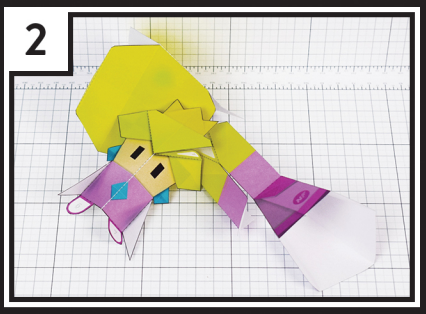
PRINCESS PEACH MAY have turned evil in Paper Mario: The Origami King, but she's still so cute! Wouldn't you like to have a little paper princess of your own? Well, you can! Included as a bonus alongside this NF issue is an exclusive Origami Peach papercraft toy, brought to you by Alex Gwynne of Fold Up Toys. Follow the instructions below to safely assemble her. Have fun! **— LUCAS**

1



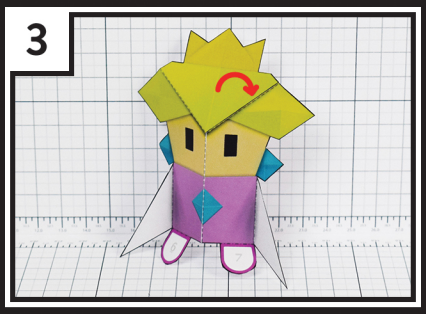
Carefully cut out the parts along the solid black line.

2



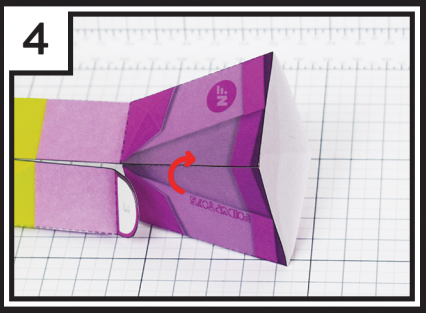
Fold along the dotted lines following the Folding Key.

3



Glue down Tab 1 to the opposite side of the hair section.

4

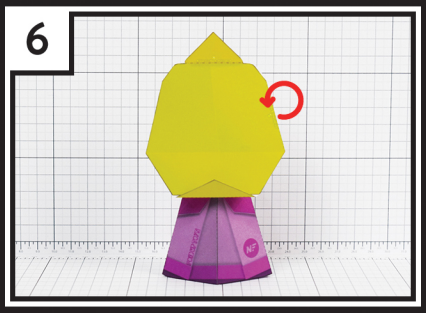


Curve around the dress and glue down Tab 3 to the inside of the dress, as shown.

5

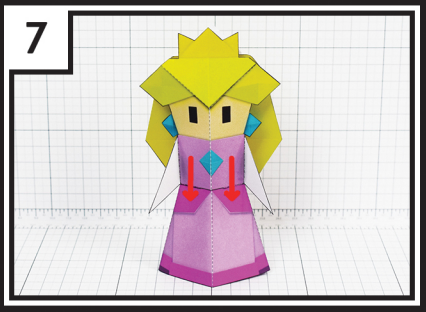
Fold down the back hair piece and glue the two tabs marked 4 to each other.

6



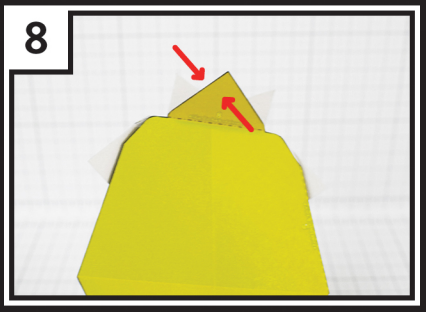
Fold over the back of the hair, gluing the back sides of the page together.

7



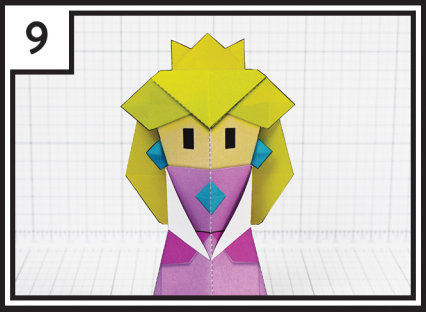
Connect the front of the body to the dress using Tabs 6 & 7, gluing them in place inside the dress. They should sit on both sides of a protruding blue notch inside.

8



Connect the front and back sides of the crown by gluing the back sides of the page together, making sure the back aligns with the central point of the crown.

9



You're all finished! Enjoy your brand-new Origami Peach that you put together all by yourself! (Or with help from someone else. That's totally cool too!)

PATREON.COM
/NINTENDOFORCE

/NINTENDOFORCE

WWW.
NFMAGAZINE.COM

YouTube
/NFMAGAZINE

@NINTENDOFORCE